

Sermons Preached by the Rev. Raymond Shaheen, D. D.

<u>Year: 1980</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
January 2, 1980	Untitled	
January 6, 1980	"Keeping God in the Picture"	John 6:1-15
January 20, 1980	"A Sermon For the Present Hour"	Luke 16:10
January 27, 1980	"Precious Few"	Luke 8: 40-51
February 3, 1980	"The Life of the Party"	John 2: 1-11
February 17, 1980	"Of People and Pigs"	Mark 5: 1-20
February 24, 1980	Miracles: "Silencing Christ"	Mark 1: 21-28
March 2, 1980	Miracles: "A Committee of Four"	Mark 2: 1-12
March 9, 1980	Miracles: "To God Be Glory"	Luke 18: 35-43
March 16, 1980	Miracles: "To Understand A Miracle"	Mark 5: 25-34
March 23, 1980	Miracles: "The Touch of God"	Luke 5:12-16
April 6, 1980	"The Good News of Easter"	Ephesians 1:20
April 13, 1980	Miracles: "Four Day Slate"	John 11
April 20, 1980	Miracles: "To A town Called Nain"	Luke 7:11-17
April 27, 1980	Miracles: "In An Atmosphere of Faith"	Mark 3:1-6
May 4, 1980	Miracles: "To Delay Is Not To Deny"	Matthew 15: 21-28
May 11, 1980	"Prototype of the Christian Home"	Luke 2: 15-51
May 18, 1980	"—So Naturally..."	Colossians 1:28
May 25, 1980	"The Man With the Book"	Luke 4:16-30
June 1, 1980	"On the Holy Trinity"	

1980- continued

	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
June 8, 1980	Miracles: "Everything Is Possible"	Mark 9:19-29
June 15, 1980	"Worthy Son"	Luke 2
June 22, 1980	"On Taking God At His Word"	John 4: 53-54
June 29, 1980	"A Very Special Person"	Matthew 8: 5-13
July 6, 1980	"A Nation In Trouble"	Psalms 127:1
July 13, 1980	"As One To Another"	
July 27, 1980	"On Being Perfect About Prayer"	Matthew 5: 48
August 3, 1980	"About Prayer"	Luke 11: 13
August 10, 1980	"On Lying"	Luke 11: 13
August 17, 1980	"When Life Turns Robber"	Colossians 3: 9
August 24, 1980	"What About Depression"	Psalms 42: 11
August 31, 1980	"Now About Fear -"	St. Mark 4: 40
October 12, 1980	"Something To Sing About"	Psalms 27:13
October 19, 1980	"Like Seeds Well Dropped"	Mark 4: 26-29
October 26, 1980	"Nothing Ever Says Won"	John 8: 31-32
November 2, 1980	"Something Happy and Good"	Luke 14: 15
November 9, 1980	"An Inside Job"	Luke 13:21
November 16, 1980	"Our Bitter Need"	Matthew 7: 24-27
November 23, 1980	"How Not to be Crippled by Guilt"	Matthew 2: 1-2
November 30, 1980	"Unmistakably God"	
December 7, 1980	"The Fact of Christmas"	Matthew 2: 2
December 14, 1980	"The Circle of Love Which is Christmas"	
December 21, 1980	"About the Wise Men"	
December 24, 1980	"Christmas is God's Way of saying 'I Love You'"	
December 28, 1980	"The Difference Which is Christmas"	

Sermons Preached in St. Luke Church
by the Rev. Raymond Shaheen, D.D., Pastor

1980

January 2, 1980	Memorial Service - Dr. Joachim A. K. Kluger	
January 6, 1980	The Epiphany of Our Lord	MIRACLES: <u>"KEEPING GOD IN THE PICTURE"</u>
January 13, 1980		
January 20, 1980	The Second Sunday After Epiphany	<u>"A SERMON FOR THE PRESENT HOUR"</u>
January 27, 1980	The Third Sunday after Epiphany	MIRACLES: <u>"PRECIOUS FEW"</u>
February 3, 1980	The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany	MIRACLES: <u>"THE LIFE OF THE PARTY"</u>
February 10, 1980		
February 17, 1980	Transfiguration Sunday	MIRACLES: <u>"OF PEOPLE AND PIGS"</u>
February 24, 1980	The First Sunday in Lent	MIRACLES: <u>"THE SILENCING CHRIST"</u>
March 2, 1980	The Second Sunday in Lent	MIRACLES: <u>"COMMITTEE OF FOUR"</u>
March 9, 1980	The Third Sunday in Lent	MIRACLES: <u>"TO GOD BE GLORY"</u>
March 16, 1980	The Fourth Sunday in Lent	MIRACLES: <u>"TO UNDERSTAND A MIRACLE"</u>
March 23, 1980	The Fifth Sunday in Lent	MIRACLES: <u>"THE TOUCH OF GOD"</u>
March 30, 1980		
April 6, 1980	Easter Day. The Resurrection of Our Lord	<u>"THE GOOD NEWS OF EASTER"</u>
April 13, 1980	The Second Sunday of Easter	MIRACLES: <u>"FOUR DAYS LATE"</u>
April 20, 1980	The Third Sunday of Easter	MIRACLES: <u>"TO A TOWN CALLED NAIN"</u>
April 27, 1980	The Fourth Sunday of Easter	MIRACLES: <u>"IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF FAITH"</u>
May 4, 1980	The Fifth Sunday of Easter	MIRACLES: <u>"TO DELAY IS NOT TO DENY"</u>
May 11, 1980	Festival of the Christian Home	<u>"PROTOTYPE OF THE CHRISTIAN HOME"</u>
May 18, 1980	40th Anniversary of the Ordination of Pastor Raymond Shaheen	<u>" - - SO NATURALLY . . . "</u>
May 25, 1980	Pentecost Sunday	<u>"COMMITTEE-OF-ONE"</u>
June 1, 1980	Trinity Sunday	<u>- - ON THE HOLY TRINITY</u>
June 8, 1980	The Second Sunday After Pentecost	MIRACLES: <u>"EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE"</u>
June 15, 1980	The Third Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"WORTHY SON"</u>
June 22, 1980	The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost	MIRACLES: <u>"ON TAKING GOD AT HIS WORD"</u>

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1980 - continued

June 29, 1980	St. Peter and St. Paul, Apostles	<u>MIRACLES: "A VERY SPECIAL PERSON"</u>
July 6, 1980	The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"A NATION IN TROUBLE"</u>
July 13, 1980	The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost	IN OBSERVANCE OF THE ORDINATION OF BRUCE BURKNESS <u>"AS ONE TO ANOTHER"</u>
July 20, 1980		
July 27, 1980	The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"ON BEING PERFECT"</u>
August 3, 1980	The Tenth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"ABOUT PRAYER"</u>
August 10, 1980	The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"ON LYING"</u>
August 17, 1980	The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"WHEN LIFE TURNS ROBBER"</u>
August 24, 1980	St. Bartholomew, Apostle	<u>"WHAT ABOUT DEPRESSION?"</u>
August 31, 1980	The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"NOW ABOUT FEAR - - "</u>

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1980

September 7, 1980

September 14, 1980

September 21, 1980

September 28, 1980 The Eighteenth Sunday After "TO LIVE , TO LOVE"
Pentecost - Sister Mildred's 50th
Anniversary as Deaconess

October 6, 1980

October 12, 1980 Festival of Praise "SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT"

October 19, 1980 The Festival of Harvest "LIKE SEEDS WELL DROPPED"

October 26, 1980 The Festival of Reformation "NOTHING EVER STAYS WON"

November 2, 1980 All Saints' Sunday "SOMETHING HAPPY AND GLAD"

November 9, 1980 The Twenty-fourth Sunday After "AN INSIDE JOB"
Pentecost

~~OK~~ November 16, 1980

November 23, 1980

~~OK~~ November 30, 1980 The First Sunday in Advent "UNMISTAKABLY GOD"

December 7, 1980 The Second Sunday in Advent "THE FACT OF CHRISTMAS"

December 14, 1980

December 21, 1980

December 29, 1980

1981

January 4, 1981

January 11, 1981 Anniversary Sunday "A SERMON FOR AN ANNIVERSARY
SUNDAY"

January 18, 1981 The Confession of St. Peter "ON BEING A NEIGHBOR"

January 25, 1981 The Conversion of St. Paul "ON LIVING IN TWO WORLDS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

It is written in the Good Book, "For now we see through a glass darkly."
In company with many of you who are here, I was not only his pastor, I was his
patient....."The chart, please -- the third line from the bottom...

...the bottom line.....now, is that better?"

God puts certain people in this world to help us see things. God puts
certain people in this world to help us see things better. Every single one
of us runs his course through life, I dare say, with somewhat impaired vision.
There are any number of things that we never clearly see...there are any number
of things that we never quite get into focus. There are some things that you
and I cannot do by ourselves, and so God puts someone in this world, gifted
and skilled, to help us. That's exactly what the ministry of the healing arts
is all about, to help us.

Only a few of you saw it perhaps, but in that spacious corridor that separates the Nave from the addition recently put on this building, and near the entrance from Dale Drive, is a deacon bench. That deacon's bench was in a physician's office for a number of years. After that physician went to be in God's nearer presence, the one who had claimed his heart and his soul saw fit to have it placed in this church.

I used to sit on that deacon's bench in that physician's office, and in company with any number of people, as I sat there I would be saying to myself, If only he can help me....if only he can help me to become better. In many a physician's office there is a deacon's bench on which people sit -- all having one thing in common: hoping and praying that that man or that woman in that office might be able to help them.

God in His wisdom, God in His love places certain people in this world whose primary function is to help other people. Someone once said that the lawyer sees people at their worst.....a minister of the Gospel sees them at their best.....but a physician sees them exactly as they are. There isn't much that you can keep from the discerning and probing eye of the good physician. And God gifts some people that way, God endows them that they might be able to probe and discern for the simple purpose that they should fulfill their primary role to help people become better, to see things in proper focus.

When Norman Cousins went out to India, he came back and wrote an article. He vividly recalled the seemingly endless number of people waiting to be attended to by the physician. And he soon discovered that any number of physicians could not be equal to their responsibility if they succumbed to what he referred to as "compassion fatigue" - - compassion fatigue that's born out of an agony in one's soul because of the needs of so many people.

In company with many of you who are here tonight I knew his compassion, and I knew his concern. An extraordinarily precious thing about it all was this: that when you sat in his chair when he examined you, it's as though you were the only patient in the world. God endows some people with that kind of a gift, to be able to pay attention to this person as though none other had been waiting, as though none other had been there before you, as though none other would come after you. And yet each who sat in that chair received the same measure of professional skill and the same measure of compassion.

"Now we see through a glass darkly" - - none of us runs his course through life seeing things exactly as they ought to be unless someone is there to help us, unless someone is there to take the scales away from our eyes, unless someone is there to remove the impairment. God allows some people to have that high and holy role in life. And when God thought of your needs and when God

thought of my needs, he thought in terms of Joachim August Karl Kluger.

That's why we're here tonight, to give thanks to God who has done
this for us, who gave his life to us, who ministered among us....

That's why we're here tonight, to give thanks to God for the one who
brought him into the world, to give thanks to God for those who
shared him with us and made his ministry possible, who never
counted the hours when he wasn't home but gave thanks to God that
he could pour out his life with dedicated skill and compassion.

He was a good physician who very early in life, by the grace of God, got
things in proper focus and saw things clearly for the rest of us who see
through a glass darkly.

I had a friend once who made a trip to the very western part of this
country. It was to have been the trip-of-trips, never again would he have a
journey quite like it. He had saved for the journey, he had gotten a camera,
he had purchased any amount of film, he took pictures here and there, no matter
where he went. And when he came back he sent the film to the processing labor-
atory.....only to get the eventual report that they did not turn out a bit well.
Every one was scarcely discernible. And the man in the laboratory said, "I'm
sorry to tell you, but you never got the camera, no matter where you went, in
proper focus!" What a tragedy for any of us to come to journey's end and to
discover that we never had the thing in clear focus.

The man whom we honor tonight has helped many of us from that fate, to
see things clearly -- not only physically, but spiritually as well. Joachim
August Karl Kluger, may the smile of God's favor rest upon you and may your
soul be eternally at peace.

* * * *

(Transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "KEEPING GOD IN THE PICTURE"

1

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Jan 6-15

Within the two decades and more that God has allowed me to come to this sacred desk Sunday after Sunday, I have on occasion invited you to think about a series of sermons. I think particularly of that first series that was introduced the very year that I became your Pastor. It was a study of the NAMES GIVEN TO THE EARLY CHRISTIANS . . . for the intention then was that we might know something of what ought to characterize our devotion to Christ and to go back and discover the names by which they were known, because a name does describe....

...people receive certain names, and then we know the kind of person they were meant to be or are, because of the names that they carry....

I recall, of course, the series of sermons based on the Lord's Prayer...

-- the series of sermons on the Ten Commandments....

-- the series of sermons when we considered the names given by which the body of believers was known....

-- the sermons from time to time on certain Bible characters.

As I come to this sacred desk on the first Sunday of 1980, I want to introduce a series of sermons to be preached for the most part from this pulpit between now and June. It will be a study of the MIRACLES.

I have never done this before. And while God gives me a certain measure of excitement every time I come to this sacred desk, I want you to know how excited I am about this series. For when you consider the miracles, you have to deal specifically with the power and the compassion of God. For when God's about to perform -- and it's not simply because He wants to display some power, -- whatever God does, He does because He loves us.

And when you study the miracles you'll also discover that sometimes we deny ourselves the miracles because we do not provide the faith by which God can be made free to perform the miracle that we need.

Now before anything else is said, I don't know what that word miracle triggers in your mind. I don't know exactly where you're coming from when you speak the word 'miracle.' But I must say to you very quickly, I'm about to discourage you ever of thinking a miracle is something that God does all by Himself and by Himself alone. Occasionally maybe -- but for the most part, if not always, I'll be bold enough to say it that way -- a miracle is not something that God does by Himself and by Himself alone. The only time I think He ever really pulled a miracle off by Himself was the first time -- the miracle of Creation. And all the other miracles that happened since then He's brought a human being into the picture -- either because of faith, or because of a need that had to be met in human beings.

I think we can say it that way. It's a general statement, of course, but there is a purpose to be served in saying and thinking that when you consider miracles, God usually employs people -- that's going to be especially true in the miracle that we're going to study today: The Miracle of The Feeding of The Five Thousand.

Ask any youngster who's gone to Sunday School to name ten miracles, and like as not in the first five he'll name the miracle of the Feeding of The Five Thousand -- the multitude. I presume because most of us have hunger pangs.... the pang is never more real, perhaps, than it is to a boy, a youngster...and then because of the involvement of so many people. Of the thirty-and-more miracles performed by Jesus and recorded in the New Testament, the miracle of the Feeding of the Multitude is the only one that's been written up by all four Gospel writers.

Now that may say any number of things. But as any student of the Scriptures knows, and as anyone who would expound the Scriptures recognizes the need to interpret the truths not only as a text but within the context -- it's/^{not}only

what it is that happened, but the circumstances surrounding the incident, the event or the occasion. You sell yourself short if you don't try to understand how the miracle happened in the first place -- what were the circumstances, or the setting?

Well.....there were a lot of people. Five thousand people is no small number. And we have been impressed by crowds recently, haven't we? Every time we turn on the television set, there's that teeming mass of people confronting us. Well, this was a crowd.

How does a crowd happen to get there? Well, it was a day when the popularity of Jesus was on the ascendency. The word had gotten around He was a great preacher. They were thrilled to hear Him preach.

....the word had also gotten around that He was a miracle-worker. And that was enough to excite any number of people, to be drawn to a miracle-worker!

I think there was also another reason why the crowd happened to be there. Something terrible had recently happened -- a man had been beheaded -- a good man, a man of whom Jesus Christ had said the grandest thing He said of any human being. John the Baptist had been brought to an untimely death by the wicked mind and a wicked heart and a wicked woman. It was an unsettling blow. And that brought people together, too. And naturally within the shadow of Jesus Christ.

Now you should also know that Jesus was about to get away from the crowd. This was part of the Scripture. That is understandable, isn't it, there had been a drain on His energy and on His time -- never deny Jesus His humanity. So He wanted to get away. But lo and behold, by the time He got to the place where He wanted to be with His disciples, the crowds were already there.

...someone has likened it to a physician who day after day and night after night had been dealing with a roomful of patients, and the time had come when he's suffering from compassion fatigue -- and he says, "I've got to get away" -- so, presumably, Jesus was in

that kind of a situation. But when He got away, the crowd was there . . .

...just like when the physician wanted to get away from his office, only to go to his rural retreat and discover that by the time he arrived the people were there and waiting for Him.

I suppose, given that type of circumstances, any human being would have said "What's the use?" and tried to ignore the situation. But this was the day of the Great Problem. That's my characterization of it: the day the multitude was fed it was the day of the Great Problem -- the day of the Great Problem because the Great Problem was made up of five thousand individual problems -- every single one of them had hunger pangs, and you put the five thousand together and you have a Great Problem.

For a while things had been going beautifully with the disciples and with Jesus. This was the day of the Great Problem.

...I need to say quite parenthetically to you, that when you understand this miracle, look at it from the standpoint that there was a problem confronting the disciples. And it's a salutary thing for us to know that we'll never have a day when we don't have problems. The most foolish notion to which I think I ever subscribed was that period in my life when I permitted myself to think that there would come a day when there wouldn't be very many problems. But if you were to ask me the lesson-of-lessons that I've learned in recent years, I'd have to include this one: exchange that the older we become, the more we ~~expect~~ one set of problems for another....

And this was the day of the Great Problem as far as the disciples were concerned.

Now....what about this whole business of problems? Well, when you and I come to the dilemma of the problem period, we do well to keep God in the picture. And that's the title for this sermon, and the text is the 6th verse of the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to John: "For Jesus himself knew what he would do." Here was the problem -- period. After a while the disciples begin to panic. They want to get rid of the problem, and they don't know how to cope with it. And all the while there stands Jesus Christ, knowing exactly what ought to be done. And this I have to say to you with all the strength I can command -- miracles never happen unless God is kept in the picture.

Now, what else can I tell you? I suppose I can tell you that when we deal with problems there are some people who are never sensitive to the fact that a problem exists. That kind of person drives me crazy -- either to be absolutely insensitive to the fact that the issue is as it is, and not be aware of it. And there are people like that. And that's one reason why you and I need to keep ourselves open to God, because God can see things that we can't see -- and as we allow God to bring things to our attention we are made aware of problems that otherwise we might ignore or permit ourselves to be insensitive to.

That's one reason why I believe in the Church. The Church sometimes is the expression of God's conscience for humanity. There are all kinds of ills around us in the body politic, the social entity which is humanity. And it is only sometimes when we come to church that we're made aware of some of these problems. Otherwise we may pretend that they're not there....but they are.

Which leads me to tell you that in this instance, the feeding of the five thousand, it was Jesus Christ who took the initiative and said, "Where are we going to buy bread that these people may eat? We have a problem on our hands!" One type of person who almost drives me crazy is the person who is not aware of the problem. There's another kind of person who almost drives me to distraction: the kind of person who once he's made aware of the problem, does nothing but talk about the problem. And you and I are inclined to do that today. Wherever we go

we find ourselves talking about this terrible thing that has happened on the international scene -- not that we shouldn't talk about it. But for some of us we never get beyond that stage. We keep saying, "It's a problem....it's a problem....it's a problem."

Years ago when I was on a college campus I used to talk to some of the students who were involved in education. And we had a professor on our campus who would drive the students up the wall -- they were the ones who did student-teaching, and then they'd come back for their seminars or their conferences with him. And like as not they'd say, "Professor, this is the problem" -- and then they would say what the problem was....and all that they ever got from him was, "Well, that is a problem, isn't it?" And that's about all we get from some people. Jesus Christ took the initiative and said: "Here is the problem." And then He did something more, and said, "What are you going to do about it?"

When you put God in the picture, it won't be long until God gets you in the picture. And that's precisely what happened. And then what went beyond that? As God says to us, through Jesus Christ: "What resources do you have?" -- which leads me to say to you, that God never made any of us big enough to handle the problems of life all by ourselves, but He did make us big enough to begin to handle them. And I'm numbered among those who honestly believe that He always gives us enough by which to begin. We may not have all that it takes, but no man is without at least something by which to begin. And unfortunately there are those who down-grade the little that they may have.

And that's the sad thing about this miracle account. Read it for yourself -- it's exciting! Really it is. It's so true to human nature. As soon as one of the disciples said, "Here's a boy with his lunch" -- the immediate response was, "But what's that? -- it's so little!" And that's the mistake that some of us make: we down-grade the little that we happen to have. Keep God in the picture, however, and God says, "Give it to me." And that's the other thing that you need

to remember when a miracle's about to be performed -- it requires faith, and trust, and obedience on our part. It was a wise man who once said, "The water of the Red Sea did not begin to part until the first Hebrew got his feet wet." That miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand happened for several reasons, but ~~the~~ it most certainly did not happen until the little boy gave his lunch up into the hands of Jesus Christ. Keep God in the picture. He'll draw you into the picture.

You're familiar with the poem, aren't you, that talks about Antonio Stradivari and his violin? It ends magnificently as it ought to end:

"But even God cannot make Antonio Stradivari's violin
without Antonio."

That's why I began as I did: no matter what else you may say about a miracle -- invariably -- can I be so bold as to say that? -- it isn't something that God does by Himself and by Himself alone. Even the miracle of the Incarnation, the life of Jesus Christ here on earth -- He reached for a Mary, and He reached for a Joseph, who allowed themselves to be as instruments in His hands and as partners in His endeavors.

I should also tell you that when you and I come to deal with miracles, sometimes we permit ourselves to think that it's not a miracle unless it happens immediately. And that's not a very healthy thing to cling to either. God takes His time in getting some things done. Just because it doesn't happen as quickly as you and I think it ought to happen doesn't mean that God doesn't have His hand in it. I have been a pastor for almost forty years, and there are some people that I have known throughout this entire period who began to blossom in the Christian faith only after an investment of fifteen years had been made.

....True, this miracle happens then and there on the spot....

but not all miracles occur that quickly. Some do. But one thing is absolutely certain: they never happen unless God remains in the picture.

* * *

"A SERMON FOR THE PRESENT HOUR"

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God our
Father and from His Son, Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Luke 16:10

Today's sermon is an interruption in the series on the general theme of Miracles which was introduced two weeks ago. Today's sermon bears the title: "A Sermon For The Present Hour," and the text is the 10th verse of the 16th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke: "He that is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he that is unrighteous in a very little is unrighteous also in much."

First a word about sermons in general, and then a word about this particular sermon, and both observations against the background of the preaching from the Saint Luke pulpit over the past two-and-a-half decades.

Whatever a sermon is or is not, let it be clearly understood from the Lutheran heritage that it is primarily an interpretation of Biblical truth, in which the Lordship of Jesus Christ is exalted, a sermon that is intended to be relevant to a present situation.

It is not intended to be a political essay, a verbal exercise in support of or denial of some basic principle of philosophy or psychology. There are other platforms provided for this sort of thing, and even within the church itself. But the sermon is never true to its essential nature unless it becomes an interpretation of and an application of Biblical truth. And what is more, we have to deal with what we call the unique ingredient which is personality.

Said Phillips Brooks, that great New England divine of several generations ago, in his definition of preaching: "Preaching is the communication of truth through personality." For good or ill, the preacher and the sermon re-

main inseparable. What the preacher declares becomes channeled through the crucible of his own experience. And to that end his integrity is laid on the line every time he goes to the sacred desk.

Above all this, however, it is to be maintained -- and this is good Lutheran teaching -- that it is the Holy Spirit that does the preaching. You may not have thought of it that way, but any preacher who is worth his salt is an individual who has been made obedient to the Holy Spirit.....and when he sits down to study the Scripture, he does so as the Holy Spirit enlightens him.... and when he stands at the sacred desk and preaches, he is a servant of God, he preaches as he's empowered by the Holy Spirit. To that end, therefore, in the preaching of a sermon, it's the Holy Spirit that does the preaching, using the person who stands in the pulpit as an instrument.

And by the very same token, you who listen to the sermon, if you allow yourself to be made responsive to the Holy Spirit, always receive some good -- granted the Holy Spirit does the preaching there is then no such thing as a poor sermon. For no matter how frail or feeble the preacher may be, if he allows himself to be used by God, and if you, the listener, allow yourself to be used by God, any sermon can lead to edification and enlightenment and motivation. Any preacher worthy of the name of Christ makes himself responsive to the Holy Spirit.....any listener worthy of the name of Christ allows himself or herself to become responsive to the Holy Spirit. It's that perspective that has possessed the soul of your preacher who has been standing at this sacred desk for twenty-four years.

Now also, about the preaching from the Saint Luke pulpit for that period of time. You ought to know, some of you, by now, that I have deliberately shied away from allowing any sermon to have any semblance to an echo, strong or feeble, as the case may be, to your favorite reporter, your favorite colum-

nist, your favorite essayist, has written or spoken. I frankly admit -- you name it -- they are far more gifted and skilled than I could ever hope to be, and much more qualified.

On the other hand, I have not come to this sacred desk to provide you Sunday after Sunday with a memorandum for precise action, telling you how you ought to behave on a Monday morning at 9:00 o'clock. I do not pretend to be a specialist, providing blueprints for behavior in specific instances. If a justification for my style or substance is needed, then let it be simply this: I have tried as best I can within my limitations and the frailty of human flesh to interpret Biblical truth.....and in doing so, to speak to your predicament, more so than to your situation.

Some of you, perhaps, have not always appreciated this. Others of you have been warm in your praise and gratitude. All of you, I would believe, have been charitable in your assessment. Let me say it again and as strongly as I can, my intent has been to apply Biblical truth to your predicament, more so than to your situation, because I am not always fully aware of your situation. Your situation changes from time to time. Some of you have a situation today that you didn't have two weeks ago.....as an example:

- - had you gone to the surgeon yesterday, and the surgeon would have told you that you had inoperable cancer, your situation this morning would be vastly different than it was two weeks ago.....

Or for some of you, your situation two months from now could be somewhat different from your situation two months ago....another example, unpleasant as it may be....

- - if you discovered on Thursday of this week that your son or daughter was on drugs, and irreparable damage was being done, your situation today would be entirely different than it was last Sunday...

And while I am dealing with this kind of a catalogue....and you just learned this morning that your first-born, the apple of your eye, is pregnant, without benefit of marriage -- and she's listing for you now all the alternatives, none of which subscribes to your basic values.....your situation this morning would be vastly different than it was two weeks ago.....

...our situation changes from time to time.

But I can also tell you this: the predicament of man remains constant, for the simple reason that every single one of us is a sinner. None of us is possibly as good as he can be or would even like to be. I cling tenaciously to the doctrine of original sin. Every single one of us is less than he ought to be, less than he can be. And even in our noblest intentions, to paraphrase Luther: "at best we offer Jesus Christ rotten wood out of which to carve and a lame horse to ride." And each of us is not only a sinner, but a dependent creature. God never made any single one of us big enough to handle the changing situations of life with its attendant problems by ourselves. So therefore, come wind or weather, whatever the situation, the predicament of man remains the same -- stained by sin, and unable by his own strength to cope with a changing set of problems.

Now this leads me this morning to tell you, however, that I do feel constrained to address the present situation. I know very well that some of you would be very happy if for the last six weeks I would have done nothing Sunday after Sunday but talk about the Russians. I cannot find it in my heart nor in my mind to do that sort of thing. But I am fully aware of the fact that the world situation, which none of us escapes, is resting heavily upon every single one of us. For some of us, not since World War II have we been so shaken -- I say for some of us. It was Sir Edmund Gray who said, at the outbreak of World War I: "The lights of Europe are going out and I

doubt if we will ever see them go on again in our lifetime." I sometimes think, and I don't intend to be an alarmist, but realistically speaking, it could happen again.

I do remember World War II. I remember what Roosevelt said that day of infamy, when on that day in December 1941 I walked into a room where there was a crying baby, and as I stood by his crib -- that baby, incidentally, is now your Associate Pastor -- having heard the news that came out of Pearl Harbor, I said to myself: throughout his entire lifetime, and for the balance of the rest of my life, he and I and all the rest will deal with the scars that will remain from what's now begun.

I shudder when I think of what the international situation is, I think with some justification, because as a student of history I know that Karl Marx was once asked what was his purpose in life -- his answer was two-fold:

-- to de-throne God
and second, -- to destroy capitalism.
Communism, Karl Marx brand, is like a religion, a religion motivated by Satan, I dare say, "a religion that lives on lies" to quote a writer ". . murder, deceit and violence." And it is implacable.

I also know that Lenin said, "We will take Eastern Europe, then we will take the masses of Asia . . ." He stated as his crowning achievement of his world conquest, "We shall surround America, the last bastion of capitalism, and we shall not have to fight! It will fall into our hands like over-ripe fruit."

I also know that Khrushchev said, "We shall live to bury you" -- meaning, "We'll be around when your demise comes. Your sun will set, we'll remain."

Now against this kind of background of the international situation, this sermon is being preached for the present hour, and I fear two things:

-- first, I fear that we will fan the fires of patriotism, subscribe

to a fallacious notion that "My country, right or wrong, but wrong or right, my country" - - I fear that kind of thing. We are not lily-white. I have traveled enough on the face of this earth to know that we have no monopoly on goodness. I also know that the first casualty of war is truth. And that's a frightening thing.

I fear this, because sometimes I think that we are on the brink of war, or perhaps we're at war and we don't know it. I'm speaking realistically, not as an alarmist. And against that, right now, I fear what could be a very unhealthy patriotism. We have to guard against it. And I have no intention of coming here to falsely fan the fires of that sort of thing. And I defy anyone to question my devotion to my country. Again and again I thank God that when my father as an immigrant came from the Middle East, he did not stop somewhere else, but came to the beloved shores of America. I know what it is to know the benefits of all that's good of a land such as this, but I will not fan falsely the fires of patriotism.

But on the other hand, and more specifically as far as this sermon is concerned, I'm concerned about people who in the face of these grave events, the shaking and the trembling of the world, the fate of great nations, will say to themselves cynically, "What's the use?".....and as we're meant to go about our day's work performing the routine tasks, allowing ourselves to believe that they're so trivial, and so insignificant. And I presume this is my greater concern as I come here this morning, lest you and I become so overwhelmed, saying to ourselves, "I can't go over there and confront the Ayatollah Khomeini.....I can't go and talk to the Russian puppet in Afghanistan....I can't so much as shoulder, figuratively speaking, a musket and fight the war singlehandedly . . . "

I have a friend who told me this past week how impatient he is with the President of the United States and proceeds to tell me exactly what he would do

if he were in that position. But you and I are not in the White House, and you and I are not in positions to make those decisions that we think ought to be made. And because that happens to be true, some of us, if we don't keep our guard up, can succumb to fatalism and cynicism, as though each day's work that claims us is insignificant and trivial. How, then, to keep one's courage up, where I happen to be? -- with what's expected of me? -- in a world that otherwise seems to be so threatening, so unsettled?

I thoroughly enjoy going around and visiting the different staff members in their different offices. I know a measure of particular delight, as you might understand, when I go to Youth Ministry, because there are a number of posters in Youth Ministry....and I remember one in particular that left its imprint upon my mind: BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED - - - which is simply to say -- blossom -- mature -- become all that you were meant to be uniquely - - - where you are!no matter what's going on round about you.

Let me give you a very simple homespun illustration. When we're tempted to despair in the face of all that's going on over which presumably we have no control.....

....we have a number of odd jobs yet to be done around Saint Luke Church even though the contractor for the Enlarged Facility has gone. And so Al Sebastian, bless his soul, has brought into the picture one of those good old-fashioned carpenters -- he's between 60 and 70 years of age, the kind of a man that you tell him exactly what it is that ought to be done, and that's all you have to do. And he's ingenious, and a good craftsman, and does it!

....he was here for about four days this week, or three days. I was tempted one time to talk to him about the international situation. And then I thought, why should I? With his hammer in his hand, what can he do about it? And when he finished his week's work, I thought to myself,

What a significant thing he's done -- he did what had to be done, as assignment that was given to him, and he did it well, an honest day's work for an honest dollar. And in doing that thing he kept his courage up. And I say this to myself, perhaps that's what you and I have to say to ourselves -- bloom where we are planted - - - be faithful to the assignment that's given to us!

I get advice sometimes from people that I don't particularly like, but I try to be grateful for the advice and let it stand on its own. I remember in my beginning years in the ministry, when I happened to air, unfortunately, in her presence, some of my frustrations and how I felt I was being done in by somebody who didn't particularly understand my motivation. And God bless her, all that she said was, "Raymond, just go on sawing wood!" - - an old colloquialism that said, "Do what you have to do, and make sure that you do it well!"

I don't have to tell you that some of us fear that democracy is being threatened. We subscribe to the basic doctrine of human rights, and that's democracy at its best, and we're afraid that the world is losing its concept of democracy. So what? What can I do about it? -- make sure that the light that's placed in my hand, no matter how feebly it may burn, doesn't go out.

Walter Lippmann -- some of us used to read him, remember -- when democracy was being threatened before, he subscribed to that wonderful notion that it really depends upon plain people practicing it among themselves where they happen to be. This is what he wrote:

" . . . What is left of our civilization will not be maintained.

What has been wrecked will not be restored by imagining that some new political gadget can be invented, some new political formula improvised will save it. Our civilization can be maintained and restored only by remembering and re-discovering the truths and by re-establishing the virtuous habits on which it was founded. There is no use looking into

the blank future for some new and fancy revelation of what man needs in order to live. The revelation has been made. By it man conquered the jungle all about him and the barbarian within him. The elementary principles of work and sacrifice and duty and the transcendent criteria of truth and justice and mercy, and the grace of love and charity are the things which have made men free. Men can keep their freedom and reconquer it only by these means. These are the terms stipulated in the nature of things for the salvation of men on this earth. And only in this profound, this stern and this tested wisdom shall we find once more the light and the courage that we need . . . "

What he is saying in essence is that the tap-root of democracy is to be found deep in the daily life of people.

Why do you suppose Charles Dickens endeared himself as a writer as well as he did to so many people? Dickens did what he did for the simple reason that he took the simple, plain, unvarnished virtues and wrote about them -- introduced us to characters whose lives, unsung otherwise, were filled with interest and humor and gentleness, courage and zest. Of Charles Dickens Stefan Zweig once said, "He unveiled the poetry that was ambushed in the prosaic, he gave to simple things and unpretentious people a glow all their own. To thousands, yes even to millions, he revealed where to find the everlasting spark in their uneventful lives, where to look for the glow of the quiet joy, hidden beneath the ashes of the familiar."

"Bloom where you are planted" - - - allow yourself to come into full maturity doing the thing that needs to be done where you happen to be. I say this to you on good authority as a Christian. When our Blessed Lord was here on earth, think you for a single minute that He was free from the vexation of an international situation? There was the unsettling influence of a threatening Roman Empire. How did He spend His time? - - going around here and there

throughout Judea and Galilee talking to this person and that person, inspiring them and motivating them to become, each in his own way, all that he was meant to be by the grace of God against the background of an international situation. And some of us are inclined to think that what we have to do tomorrow morning is so monotonous and routine, so insignificant.

Granted it's a situation where the basic values can be applied according to the Christian spirit -- nothing, then, becomes insignificant. I'll tell you why I think that. With all my heart I think the thing that's holding some of those hostages in good stead this very hour is that some of them, denied so much right now, are going back and remembering what they were taught by a father...and a mother....and a Sunday School teacher, who inculcated in them a basic belief that we're children of God, and God holds us all in the hollow of His hand, whether with our belief or our unbelief.

Simplistic, you say? Too simple a thing to be said against the international situation today? I can only bear testimony to this: I thank God that there was once a woman, my mother, who did not frown upon the simple things of teaching her children to believe in the goodness of God and try to practice that faith, no matter how much they may fail or falter....no matter how dark the world may be for me, that will always be as a light.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "PRECIOUS FEW"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

11
Lk 8: 40-51

This is another in the series of sermons on the general theme of the miracles performed by Jesus Christ. Today's sermon bears the title: "PRECIOUS FEW," and the text from the 8th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

" . . . When he had come to the house he
allowed no one to go in with him except
Peter, James, John, the girl's father and
mother . . . "

....precious few.

There had been many people on the outside. In fact there's a reference in that 8th chapter of Luke to the fact that people thronged about Him, pushing and shoving from every side. But when this miracle occurred, it occurred in the presence of a precious few....as though it were absolutely necessary to have the right environment, to have the right foundation, in order to allow to happen what was meant to take place.

Life is like that. I used to think if I were charged with the responsibility of preparing teachers for the classroom, whatever else I might want to give them, I think I would propose two things that they would do well to remember: first, you learn your pupils before you teach them (that's not bad grammar). It represents a fact. And the second would be: your greater reward could come some day when you find on the face of perhaps only one pupil a responsive look. And that indeed could make it all worthwhile.

When our Blessed Lord was here on earth, He was fortunate - - every now and then He found on this person's face and that person's face a responsive look - - - precious few!

Now having said that, as I stand at the sacred desk again to talk about Miracles I am in duty bound to remind you that it's been maintained that there are two kinds of people: those who divide people into two groups; and those who do not divide people into two groups.

Now let me suggest that there are two kinds of people when it comes to miracles: those who believe in them -- and those who do not.

And of those who do not believe in miracles, there are two kinds: those who ignore the fact of miracles completely; and those who while they themselves cannot personally believe in them, cannot deny the possibility that they could happen...and perchance have happened in the lives of other people -- a kind of semi-detached respect, not overt -- subtle.

I presume the latter class is much like the learned professor who was found wearing a copper bracelet in order to ward off, so it was said, arthritis. A colleague of his noted this, and immediately said, "Don't tell me that a person as intellectual as you believes in such a thing!" Replied the professor, "Of course not - - but somewhere I read that it works whether you believe in it or not!"

Maybe it is a bit much to maintain that sooner or later, when a dastardly blow strikes, whatever its nature or condition, it could be that most of us would welcome if not pray for a miracle. Nonetheless, the fact remains, as Dr. A. Redding in his little book on the Miracles of Christ writes in his preface: "The modern world generally objects to the miracles of Christ. Those mighty works that used to make so much sense, and made so many friends, now make confusion and provide us with an increasing host of higher critics."

-- Spinoza, the great philosopher, declared majestically that
miracles are impossible.....

-- Hume claimed that they are incredible.....

-- Schlegelmacher, bless his soul, insisted that they are only
harmlessly relevant.....

And I would be less than honest if I did not admit that they have made me suspicious that Christ's miracles were made up out of the blind enthusiasm of the devotion of His apostles. It could well be that there are those here this morning, within the hearing of my voice, who have difficulty with the miracles -- a respect for what Christ said, for what He taught, but cannot match that kind of enthusiasm for His performance of miracles.

Really now, it could be a bit much for some of you to accept the fact that Jesus walked on waterthat the Carpenter's Son could reach for a boy's meager lunch, feed five thousand people and have baskets of food left over!

...it's a bit much, perhaps, for me to tell you right now that there was a man came to Jesus and said, "Our only daughter -- twelve years of age, is dying -- come, Jesus! Do something!"

You can read all about it for yourself in the 8th chapter of Luke. And Jesus responded to this earnest plea of the father devoted to his daughter, with a concern for his wife, the mother of that child -- the most precious thing that they had ever known aside from their love for one another.

...and so having come to Jesus he said, "Come -- do something!" It's a bit much, isn't it, for you to believe? But when He walked into that room, the net result was that He brought her back to life.

There isn't a single person among you who'd call for me, as an agent of God, if someone in your family was dead, and expect me, as an agent of God, to bring that person back to life. Of course you wouldn't. And I would not expect to be able to do it. I am not an extraordinary person.

Which leads me to suggest that you keep this in mind when you think of Jesus Christ: if you can't begin at any other point, then hopefully you might be willing

to admit this: He was an extraordinary person, and extraordinary people do extraordinary things. Now that shouldn't be too hard for you to accept.

-- any student of musical history knows that Mozart at the age of five wrote a concerto -- that was not an ordinary thing. Mozart was not an ordinary person. Being extraordinary, he did an extraordinary thing....

-- Francis of Assisi could preach and hold the attention of a flock of birds....many a preacher can't even hold the attention of a congregation of people - - but Francis of Assisi was not an ordinary person. Being extraordinary, he did extraordinary things....

-- A man by the name of Trudeau was told that he had incurable tuberculosis. He went up into the Adirondacks to die. And while he was there he came upon a cure, or at least a means by which to improve the condition of people who were so afflicted. He was not an ordinary person. An ordinary person would have given up and died. An extraordinary person can do extraordinary things.

Jesus Christ was not an ordinary person. The creed writers do it for us in a way that we ourselves might not have thought of doing, so that reverently we put our finger to our lips and say, "Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father" . . . which is simply to say -- He's no ordinary person.

For 24 years I have been coming to this sacred desk. Not all of you may believe what I say. But I hope you would find myself in the position of someone who went to hear another man preach, and someone said to this person, "Why do you go to hear him preach? -- do you believe what he says?" And the man replied, "Not always. But I'm impressed by the fact that he does." I am in duty bound to share with you what I believe. I would be less than worthy of the name 'Pastor'

if I gave you anything other than that. I believe that Jesus Christ was no ordinary person.

And I believe in Jesus Christ not only for what He said but because of what He did. Theodore Parker Ferris is one of the great preachers that Boston ever produced. He wrote a little paper-back bearing the title: "What Jesus Did".... ..and immediately as I looked at the title I thought to myself "Bravo!" -- for important as it may be what a person says, even more important is what that person is capable of doing. I am willing to admit in your presence that sometimes a person is as he does. Let me see you in action and I'll have some idea as to the basic integrity of your words.

It is important that people should respect Jesus for what He said. I would suggest to you that it's also important to respect Him for what He did. If you may not be able to go that far, you may find yourself comfortable in the presence of the third President of the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson had a high regard for the words of Jesus, for the sayings of Jesus, for the morals of Jesus. In fact, I have on my desk here in the study a book that was printed in 1904 (1804?), a number of decades after Thomas Jefferson had tried to get Dr. Joseph Priestly and his friend John Adams to take the four Gospels and to compile of Jesus Christ, dealing only with His sayings. And when he did not succeed in getting either Priestly or Adams to do it, he did it himself. It's called "The Morals of Jesus."

....scissors in hand, presumably Thomas Jefferson went and cut out every reference in the Gospel records to the miracles of Jesus, to the supernatural.....and as you might suppose, it ends,
" . . and then placed they the body of Jesus in the tomb."

But for those of us who have come to know Jesus in a very real way, there are some of us who are numbered as people who believe that He's not to be seen simply as a great teacher -- not just another moralist -- but as God-come-to-us-in-human-form. And as earnestly as I can say, here's where we ought to marvel with one

another! It's always made easier to believe that miracles are made possible when one believes in God.

If God is God, then God can do what we can't do. God made the world. God knows how the world was meant to operate. God knows that the great thing in life, the most powerful influence in the world, is the influence of love. And God is love. And when love is let loose in this world, amazing things always happen!

Let me give you a very homespun illustration, as homespun as I can give it to you: back years and years and years ago in the villages, where everyone knows one another -- there was the shy, reticent girl. Everybody knew she was shy and reticent, that was her nature, she said. But eventually she began to blossom, became a radiant person -- qualities in her that people never believed existed began to emerge and made themselves known. There was a wise man in the village who discovered the reason. Said he, as he thought of a particular person, "Why, he's been paying attention to her!"

(did you know that they used to use that expression
when people were being loved by another person in
particular -- 'she's having attention paid to her')
...and in that attention something began to blossom. And the wonderful thing began to take place in that person's life.

There are three things I think essential for the performance of a miracle which deal in our faith in God: faith in the wisdom of God; faith in the power of God; and faith in the love of God. Now, when you talk in these terms you readily admit that miracles will not always happen, because God may not see fit to allow it to happen. But when it does happen, it happens because the power and the force of love is being let loose and given a chance to work.

In these years that I have been given the privilege to be your pastor, every now and then I have seen something exceptionally precious happen, and the only reason I can give to it, as I think of the lives of some of you, is because you've

given God a chance to do something His way with you. And when that happens in the case of some people, when we know their prior history - - we say it's a miracle.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "THE LIFE OF THE PARTY"
(John 2: 1-11)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Today's sermon is another in the series on the general theme of
MIRACLES. Today's sermon bears the title "Life of The Party" and the text
is the 11th verse of the 2nd chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"This beginning of miracles did Jesus
in Cana of Galilee, and manifested
forth his glory, and his disciples
believed on him."

As any Bible student knows, it happened in Cana of Galilee. Jesus began
His ministry of miracles -- in a very unusual way. Let me recall it for
you as best I can and as briefly as I can.

Mary, the mother of our Lord, went to the wedding, as did Jesus and
some of the disciples. And while they were there Mary learned that the
supply of wine was rapidly being diminished, and so she came to Jesus and
she said, "They're running out of wine" -- as much as to say, "You ought
to do something about it."

...He had a reply for her, and then He went to the
people where the water jugs were kept, and He told them exactly
what to do: they were to fill them to the brim with water....and
then, before they knew it, there was an ample supply of wine....

The man in charge of the wedding was greatly pleased, for it would have
been a terrible thing, you see, to have run out of wine, and the man was
amazed to discover that the last supply of wine was every bit as good as
the wine given to the guests at the very beginning.

Now you ought to know that in those days -- it may be true today in some instances -- it's only as people have well drunken that they can't much tell the difference, that the poorer wine is served. But this man marveled -- the last was every bit as good as the first!

And then John ends this passage of Scripture by saying, as the words of this text indicated: "This was the beginning of mericles by Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and He manifested forth His glory, and His disciples be-lieved on Him."

When you think of miracles I know exactly the questions that go through your minds, and none, perhaps, is more important than this one, particularly for those of a scientific bent: How did it happen?

As I deal with this miracle in your presence this morning, I'll do my best to answer certain questions, hopefully to your satisfaction, as to where it occurred, as to when it occurred.....but I shan't even think of trying to answer how it happened. But the full impact of the sermon, I hope, will deal as to the why it occurred.

Dr. William E. Orchard, a distinguished British preacher, used to say that had he been around when Jesus performed miracles, he'd be inclined to say as soon as Jesus was finished: "Would you mind running through that again? -- I'd like to see how you do it." For shame upon you, Dr. Orchard, that's not the important thing, as to how it happens. The important thing is always why it occurred.

And John the Evangelist, the writer of the Fourth Gospel, bless his soul, doesn't always deal with what we might call miracles. His favorite terminology is signs....and when he looked upon the miracles he wrote of them as signs. Now what is a sign? A sign identifies, a sign interprets, a sign points to something. So when you think in terms of miracles, why don't you begin as John the Evangelist did and consider primarily: What is to be meant by this? -- What interpretation are we to be placing upon it? Why did it

ever happen?

For many of us, we get hung up with the event itself. No matter where you look in life, sometimes we place undue emphasis upon the thing itself as it happens. But the value that's to be placed upon it is to the meaning that we're to give to the event or the incident. And that's where you and I ought to put the full impact, allow the full impact of this miracle to rest upon the fabric of our minds.

Well, let's begin. Where did it take place? That's very important.
"Jesus manifested His glory - - -

...in the temple?

...in the synagogue? "

You'd almost expect me to say that's where He began to reveal Himself. I spend a great deal of my time and energy when I meet with you on a Sunday morning hoping that when the hour of worship is over, that some of you may walk away feeling as though you'd been in the presence of God -- as we gather together for the worship experience, as though this is a very special place where the glory of the Lord is revealed. I would hope that that would be true. But significantly enough, when we deal with this passage of Scripture, the glory of Jesus Christ was not manifested first in the synagogue or in the temple - - - " . . in Cana of Galilee" -- in a nondescript kind of village, and in a home....at a wedding.

Now, many of us are foolish enough to permit ourselves to believe that it's only when people gather for worship that the glory of the Lord is to be experienced. What you and I need to remember is that God takes Himself to people where they are, in the common ventures of life, in the common experiences of life. We begin with this. (omission as tape was turned)

Important as it is, Archbishop Temple used to say: God has a lot of things in which He's interested besides religion.

When did it happen? -- that's the second question. Says the Evangelist,

" -- at the beginning." This is how He got started. Now just for the fun of it, from a human perspective, let's say to ourselves, suppose Jesus Christ would have had an agent, suppose He would have had a manager...can't you imagine his getting together with Jesus and saying, -- "Well it's time we officially launched your campaign, Jesus, we'll get this show on the road -- and it's terribly important that we start auspiciously from the very beginning . . . "

They do that all the time, you know -- politicians do that -- when the candidate launches his political career, it's done with so much fanfare and flamboyance -- to begin auspiciously....

...well this is the way Jesus began His ministry of miracles, and I can imagine the manager saying: "Oh no! -- not changing water into wine! Why don't you walk on the Sea of Galilee? -- that's spectacular! ...you said something about the possibility of feeding five thousand people -- that's the one to begin with! ...or the ace in the hole could be: bringing that man Lazarus back from the dead -- they'd never forget that!"

But Jesus never sought to be sensational, He never thought to win people by spectacular methods. So He begins His miracle ministry in this almost insignificant way -- not so much to place a great value upon the miracle itself as to what the miracle itself represents.

Now you have to be very patient with me, particularly if you're the type of person who would be far happier if Jesus had changed wine into water. But the record is as it is: it was water changed into wine.

Now you have to understand something about the Middle East, and particularly in the day of Jesus. They were the disadvantaged ones, they were the deprived ones, these people to whom Jesus ministered. Life was dread and

monotonous, and very, very drab, and the only thing that ever came along that gave them a measure of excitement was when they might go to a wedding. It was a great and happy time, a time of great rejoicing....and wine was an essential as it introduced an element of exhilaration.

There's no mistaking the fact, in that part of the world water is not always fit to drink -- as anyone who's traveled in that part of the world who knows all about the open sewers, and the contamination, and for many people wine was about the only thing that was fit to drink, and happily enough for them, exhilarating. And it added to the joy of the wedding....and no host would plan a wedding without having an ample supply of wine so that the rejoicing could continue to the very end!

Now, Mary, the mother of our Lord, was there. As I read the Scripture I get the kind of feeling that she was in charge -- she was a neighbor, or a relative or a friend, perhaps, -- a kind of a Mae Troxler, taking charge of the wedding reception. And then it occurs to her that they're running out of wine.....so she goes to Jesus, and Jesus then makes all the necessary arrangements so that the host will not be embarrassed and that there can be a great measure of rejoicing until the very end. And that's what you need to remember: Jesus Christ, then, introduces the resources that allow it to be a happy event until the conclusion.

At first reading, maybe even the second or the fifth, it remains, as do all miracle accounts in Scripture, difficult to understand from a so-called scientific point of view. But we should not shy away from any miracle just because to our eyes its two-and-two make something more than four. As far as this one, the water-into-wine-event is concerned, we should do well to accept at face value immediately the inherent truth which is the "intoxicating" presence of Christ! Let's not waste precious time trying to figure out the how-and-why of a speeded-up fermentation. Rather let us deal with the precious truth of what happens when Christ becomes the life of the party.

All of life is like a party. It's meant to be enjoyed, to be a happy thing, to the very end.

And what a precious thought to know that Jesus Christ went to a wedding, to allow that couple about to be married, that as He was present so He would smile upon them with a smile that they might remember as long as they were married.

With our 40th wedding anniversary coming up in May, I have a vantage-point now that I can speak to couples that I didn't have before when they come to talk to me about their marriage. And gleefully I say to them, when I discover how much they're in love: "Don't lose the glow!" And then I also encourage them to keep growing in their love, and also to anticipate the fact that there can be a transformation in their love from one stage to another, but it's meant to become more precious as the years go by. This I most certainly believe.

And that's particularly true with our experience with Jesus Christ. Once we come to know Him as Lord and Saviour, there's an intoxicating quality that comes over us, a glow and a joy that no man without Christ can ever know.

I was brought up on Gospel hymns -- unashamedly I tell you this -- and I think of that one in particular, I hum it every now and then: "Jesus' Love is Sweeter, Sweeter As The Years Go By" . . . and anything that I covet for any of you is this: that Jesus Christ becomes increasingly precious to you, that each year He becomes more meaningful to you than ever before, and happily so.

It's a joyful thing to be a Christian. In the midst of merriment, there was Jesus Christ. Our son Jon, the brother of your Associate Pastor, as some of you know is an artist, a painter. And some day I wish Jon could do for me what I've never seen done -- I wish he could paint for me a happy

Christ, a Christ who as soon as you look at that face, causes you to smile broadly, and arouses in you the feeling that life is meant to be a joyful thing.

I found myself smiling rather broadly as I came down in the procession for this service, as I did in the earlier service -- maybe some of you caught that trace of smile on my face because I was thinking (now bear with me).....Cardinal Cushing was that beloved prince of the Church in Boston -- a very dynamic, a very vital person....

....once he was in a procession -- amidst all the pomp and ceremony of the Roman Catholic Church, adorned in his vestments as a Cardinal.....and as he was walking down the aisle surrounded by the priests and the altar boys and all that sort of thing, he happened to see his sister standing in the congregation.. ...and as he passed by he said, "Where in heaven's name did you get that hat?".....and every bit his sister, she replied -- "With green stamps!"

.....to be able to smile broadly, to be able to laugh, to be able to be possessed with a measure of joy in the midst of solemnity -- this is what it means to be a Christian, to be numbered in the ranks of the redeemed.

Life is a party, and Jesus Christ wants always to be invited as a guest, to smile upon it, to lift it up to a high level. You can't think of debauchery at that wedding -- you can't think of people given to drunkenness as that ample supply of wine was brought forth -- with Jesus Christ present.

I'm fully aware of the fact that today I begin my 25th year among you. I am profoundly grateful. I would like to make the most of what years remain, whatever the number may be, and I defy anyone to think that this is a

vain thing when I tell you this, but I would pray Almighty God, whom I serve, that these remaining years would be the best years that I would be spending among you, as I ask God to constantly renew and increase in me His Spirit.

I get letters every now and then from some of you, and I appreciate them. Within these almost two-and-a-half decades no letter has come to mean more to me than this one, a letter received a few years ago:

"Thank you, Pastor, for allowing me to discover all over again what an exciting thing it is to be a Christian."

Jesus Christ went to a wedding in Cana of Galilee....

....manifested His glory.....

....introduced to His disciples joy

....for He's the one who said, "I have come that you may have life,

that you may have abundant life, and that your joy may be full . . "

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "OF PEOPLE AND PIGS"

(Mark 5: 1-20)

GRACE, MERCY and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

There is one who ministers to any number of people in the name of Jesus Christ by the medium of television, and on occasion when I have heard him I have been impressed by what he says inevitably in each telecast -- "Something wonderful is going to happen to you today!"

That's the kind of God we have, a kind of God who is still in charge, a kind of God whose hand is still able to do wonderful things. And every now and then, as though to prove His point, a miracle happens. For what is a miracle? A free translation for our purpose this morning could be: an occasional sign of what God is always up to -- an occasional sign to remind us of the power of God, the compassion of God, and the wisdom of God.

Every now and then you and I meet certain people who stand out above all other people -- nonetheless as human as you and I may be, yet with extraordinary qualities -- as reminders to us of what human nature is possible of becoming when they allow all their gifts and skills to be brought to the full. Every now and then God performs a miracle -- to remind us of what His power and His wisdom and His compassion are always capable of doing.....if only we avail ourselves of that possibility constantly.

I suppose it's in that manner and in that mood that I keep returning to the sacred pulpit during these weeks at hand to talk to you about the Miracles of God. For in this day and age when we pride ourselves so much on the things that we're able to do, we need to stand in awe of the kind of thing which God is able to do -- just because He's wise, just because He's powerful, and always because He's compassionate.

Today's sermon, another in the series on MIRACLES, bears the interesting title "Of People and Pigs," and the text -- you can find it for yourself in any one of the three Gospels, it was that important, that Matthew, Mark, Luke -- all three of them, make much of it and deal with it at length. For our purpose, this line from the story:

"And those who had seen it told the others what had happened to the demoniac, and all about the pigs."

As quickly as I can, let me relate the story for you. You can read it for yourself in the 5th chapter of Mark, the 8th chapter of Luke....

...the disciples and Jesus had just had a harrowing experience on the Sea of Galilee. Had Jesus not been present they would all have perished. It was a nightmare. Now they were safely ashore, and no sooner had they landed than they were confronted by a mad-man....the Scriptures refer to him as one who was demon-possessed -- and this crazed person is there in front of them. Small wonder that there is no reference in the Scriptures to what the disciples said -- they presumably didn't say anything -- they were scared stiff. And undoubtedly some of them may have thought to themselves, we'd have been far better off out there on the sea, despite the fierceness of the storm, than to be confronted by a crazy person! -- a madman! -- not in charge of himself -- a man so tormented that even when they sought to restrain him, he would break the chains, the bonds, the fetters. He was Samson-gone-berserk, that's what he was. He couldn't even keep clothing on himself. he dashed himself against the stones, and his strength was super-strength...and there he was....they had nothing to do but stay there. But fortunately Jesus Christ was present. And in a very calm way, and in a very courageous way, and with that utmost of confidence that becomes Him, Jesus Christ takes the initiative....and pays attention to him.

Now I want to say to you quite parenthetically that you can't possibly read the Scriptures without eventually coming to the precious truth that on page after page there is the encounter by Jesus Christ with one person after another -- that's the story of Jesus Christ, encountering one person after another, paying attention specifically to one person, whatever that person's need could be. And so Jesus Christ pays attention to this mad-man. He confronts him -- the Scriptures has it that the mad-man thought He was tormenting him.

Had you ever thought of Jesus Christ as the tormenter? He can torment us, you know, He can disturb us. Arthur N. Whitehead once referred to God, in our relationship with Him, as one who allows us to pass through three different stages....now you think about this for a moment . . .

-- there are some people who think in terms of God as the void...

-- then the next stage, God the enemy -- for once we come into an awareness of God, He looms upon the scene as one who stands in opposition to all that we want and to all that we seem to cherish....

-- and the third stage is when God becomes our friend . . .

God the void....God the enemy...God the friend....

In this case, Jesus Christ is showing Himself friendly to this person, despised by others, ignored by others. The net result is that Jesus Christ performs a miracle.

Now, whatever you may think of demon-possession, your highly sophisticated mind today, schooled and trained in psychiatry as you may be -- whatever you may think of demon-possession, I'm here to tell you this morning that it was very real to those people, and very real to Jesus Christ. So Jesus Christ becomes the exorcist and frees the man from the demons -- not one, but when he was asked his name, he said, "My name is Legion -- five, six thousand people at war within

me!"

I'll give you this for what it may be worth as I prepared for this sermon, and it might be quite acceptable to you, because any number of things that seem mystifying to us in Scriptures can be explained. There's one student who maintains that when he said his name was Legion, he was thinking in terms of the Roman legions who had come into his community and, as has been true for some occupying forces, they tortured the loyal ones, and he had seen the atrocities committed before his own very eyes -- to the women and to the children and to the old people....and it drove him mad. And the only thing that he could recall from that whenever anybody confronted him -- he'd respond --

"Legion . . . Legion . . . Legion . . . Legion . . . Legion "

...they had driven him mad.

Then there's the school of thought that maintains because in his crazed situation he had that high shrill voice, confronted by Jesus Christ -- small wonder then that his voice drove the pigs into the sea, as they were frightened.

But be that as it may, that's the way the story ends -- at the command of Jesus Christ the man was restored to all that he was meant to be -- fully clothed, in his right mind, completely composed....and the pigs driven into the sea.

Then what happened? Time doesn't allow me to go on much longer than this but simply to read what I wrote for you in this week's MESSENGER:

" . . . and if it weren't in the Bible, you'd probably not believe it, or would you? After all, it is so much like real life. In brief -- here's what happened. Jesus, newly arrived to those parts, restored a mad man to sanity. And then the sane people began acting like crazy! Of course, you have to know the whole story. The bottom line simply indicates that sooner or later even a good deed carries a price tag. Nothing is for nothing. The mad man seemingly was cured at the expense of a herd of pigs. The price, the people who owned the pigs thought, was too high. It drove them crazy and they told Jesus to get out of town -- in a hurry . . . "

This is the tragic element in the story. Good had been done. A single person had been restored to sanity, to be put in their midst, to live as he

was meant to live. But those who made a profit from their pigs could not tolerate it.

With all the strength that I can command, I am in duty bound to ask you: How dear a price are you willing to pay to have people restored to sanity, clothed in the fulness of righteousness, at the touch of Jesus Christ?

.....Any number of people that you may know -- you may even be numbered among them yourself -- would much rather keep things pretty much as they happen to be rather than pay the price to have them improved.....

And that's a damnable thought.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "THE SILENCING CHRIST"

(Mark 1: 21-28)

GRACE, MERCY and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

We continue the series of sermons based upon the general theme: "The Miracles of Our Blessed Lord." Today's sermon, for want of a better title, is entitled: "THE SILENCING CHRIST" and the text is the 25th verse of the first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark:

" . . and Jesus rebuked him, saying, Be quiet,
come out of him. . . "

Had the proto-type of Our Man Stauderman been around in the days of our Blessed Lord, in all likelihood he would have been the Religion Editor of the Capernaum Chronicle, and I can well imagine him coming to the Executive Editor or the Senior Editor and saying, "We have never seen anything quite like it -- the whole town has gone mad. This man's name is on the lips of hundreds upon hundreds of people. We'd better give him adequate coverage - - "

...I can also see how he might be choosing the headlines:

CARPENTER-TURNED-PREACHER CONDUCTS CAPER IN CAPERNAUM

...or if he hadn't chosen that one, surely this one would have appealed to him:

GUEST PREACHER ENGAGES IN SHOUTING MATCH

...or how about this one:

GUEST PREACHER SILENCES ONE WHO INTERRUPTS HIS SERMON

Had our-man-Bill-Theis been around, the Managing Editor might have assigned him a particular piece, that in all likelihood would have won the Pulitzer Prize of that day....for our-man-Theis would have dealt with it in this manner:

"Strange! -- Unpredictable! -- Has had no formal theological

training! Has been a carpenter's apprentice! For the greater part of his life has spent his years in Nazareth!and then Bill would have chosen his words very carefully as he introduced the thought that the world could never forget that not much good was known to have come out of Nazareth!

Then he would have gone on to tell how the Preacher came to town, and as he came to town he gave people to understand that it was all going to be so different from now on. He used such strange figures of speech as: "The Kingdom of God is here! -- now! -- what you have been looking for has arrived! Look no farther -- you can have it! -- today!"

And then I also presume the Managing Editor would have assigned some of his office people to interview some of the wandering preacher's recruits. In no time at all he had lined up such unlikely people as a man named Peter....James...John.....and I can see how he would have interviewed each one of them:

"You must be crazy to leave your day's livelihood and follow a wandering preacher -- with that strange stare in his eyes - - - ! "

....what copy they must have supplied at that time.

I'm perfectly justified in telling it to you in this way, you see, because after it was all said and done as far as that event in Capernaum was concerned -- you can read it for yourself in that first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark -- the people couldn't get out of church fast enough. To do what? To talk about the new preacher-come-to-town.

I'd like to think that maybe they talked about what He said. But I'm not so sure. Did it ever occur to you that most of the things that occurred and are recorded in the Gospel record deal with the things that Jesus did....only a portion of what He said. By the way, I run the risk of embarrassment, of course I do: How many sermons do you remember? Long after the sermon is forgotten, it could well be that the preacher is remembered -- not perhaps so much for what he

said, but for who he was, and what he did. That constituted the kind of thing that these people, as they ran out of church, had to tell people. They talked about the preacher.

The record says that when He preached, He preached with authority, not as the scribes. There was a pristine quality about Him, which is simply to suggest that when He stood in their midst it was as though God had arrived -- as He did!

Paul Scherer, in one of his marvelous sermons, had this turn of speech, that when Jesus came and walked among people, that there were those who reverently put their fingers to their lips and whispered the name of GOD. Now that's what you need to remember as I bring to your attention another miracle performed by Jesus Christ. For as is true so often, it isn't the thing itself that needs to be recalled. The thing that needs to be emphasized is the meaning given to the thing that occurred.

You know that, don't you? Even when death comes into your family circle -- be patient with me now, I am not insensitive - - - the more important thing is what we learn from the experience of death -- the meaning of a life that was lived than the simple fact that on a certain day in a certain place a certain person happened to die. It isn't the thing in itself that we need to talk about so much as it is the meaning that we have to draw from it, the conclusion to which we come.

You can't get me hung up, now, when the fact that this man, demon-possessed, was exorcised. You may or may not believe in demon-possession. I'm in duty bound to tell you, in the day of Jesus they did. I'm in duty bound to tell you that in the day of Jesus Christ, Jesus himself accepted the fact that this was a person who was demon-possessed. But what thrills me to no end is the fact that when He came near Capernaum, He came preaching, He came teaching, saying: "The Kingdom of God is now present" - - which means God's in charge! God is here!.....which is simply to suggest -- good is taking over -- it's greater than evil. Evil in the final analysis remains only the second most important

power in the world. The power of God is always greater.

I wish it were possible for each of us to sit down sometime, face to face, and do nothing but talk about Jesus Christ. I don't know how you really read Him sometimes. I really don't know how you understand Him sometimes. But by the responsibility thrust upon me as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ I am in duty bound to keep telling you how I see Him: God-come-to-us-in-person -- God come to us in this carpenter's-son-turned-preacher to remind us that God is still in charge, that there is a better way of dealing with things, that we don't have to remain in the grip of sin, that we don't have to be storm-tossed and defeated. We can be made whole, we can become all that we're meant to be by the grace of God.

George Buttrick tells us in one of his books how in New York City, here and there one comes upon, in the springtime, a patch of green.....and all around Central Park, you may find what represents desolation -- the sordid tenaments, damaged souls, defeated people.....but then there is that patch of green!

In this world that's sin-soiled and stained there appeared in Capernaum a man who was different, who when people looked at Him they allowed themselves to believe that there is hope, that they didn't have to be defeated. They could become what they were meant to be.

Robertson-of-Brighton, a great British preacher, - - do you know that there was a shop-keeper, who when he was tempted to short-change people and to deal in shoddy merchandise, would go to the back room in his shop and look at the picture of Robertson-of-Brighton, the preacher. He had found something in him that made him want to be better than he had been, and never to be less than he could be.

You ask me what Jesus Christ means to me - - if you can't begin at any other point, begin at that point. Let me read for you now what I wrote for you on the front page of the MESSENGER:

" . . . it looked and sounded very much like a shouting match in church. Of course: that's exactly what it was. And the contenders? Jesus, if you please, and a demon-possessed man. How did it end? Do you have to ask? For the record, however, let it be said again and again -- it ended with one loud shout, and then it was almost over. Not quite. The people who experienced it talked about Him for days and days. They had never seen Anyone-Like-Him, Jesus, the Exorcist come to town . . . "

.....they couldn't wait to get out of church fast enough to tell people how they had encountered Jesus Christ. What a happy thought if that could be recorded in your behalf!

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "COMMITTEE OF FOUR"

Mark 2: 1-12

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The study in the miracles continues. Frankly, I don't know exactly where you are in your appreciation for miracles, even though they appear page after page in the New Testament, and even though you may remember some of them from your Sunday School days, I don't quite know, honestly I don't, how positive you are in your reaction to the miracles -- whether you permit yourself to think, well, that's something that happens that I don't quite understand but something that God sees fit to do whenever He thinks that He wants to pull off a miracle. Maybe you're not just much gripped by miracles because you've never seen a miracle occur.....or maybe you think miracles occurred only in the day of Jesus, and they're not much relevant today, this study of miracles, that is.

It is a very unfortunate thing that for many people who read the Bible, they have a way, unwittingly, of permitting themselves to think that everything that occurred in the Scriptures occurred then and there, and that when the last chapter was written, it's as though God shut down the business -- that was it. God is God. And the God who was active then is active now! If God could perform miracles then, 2,000 - 3,000 years ago, 4,000 years ago, and God is still the same God - - how foolish, then, for any of us to think that God cannot perform miracles today.

Because I don't quite know where you are in your appreciation for miracles, I would be less than honest now not to say parenthetically that one man wrote me a letter when he heard me announcing the first Sunday that there

were 30-some miracles in the New Testament....and he came to the conclusion that I was going to preach on every one of those 30-some miracles.....and the second paragraph in his letter said, "Do you really have to do it?" - - he had no enthusiasm at all for a series of sermons based upon the Miracles. And yet I hasten to tell you that I'm quite excited about them, because I really think that one of the basic weaknesses of contemporary Christianity is our failure to appreciate the power of God, the wisdom of God, the compassion of God. And these are the three things that are absolutely essential if miracles are to be performed.

And maybe that's one reason why we don't get too excited about miracles, is because we don't fully appreciate the fact that God is able to perform them, and that God is wise enough to know when one ought to be pulled off....and then to fully appreciate the fact that whatever miracles He performs, He performs because He loves us -- not because He is on a ego trip and wants to prove to us some display of His power. Whatever God does, He does out of love.

And then sometimes I'm inclined to think that some of us don't appreciate the miracles because we permit ourselves to think that miracles are done only by God single-handedly. I don't know, honestly I don't know of anything God ever did by Himself and by Himself alone, except creation. Like as not, every time He went to pull off a miracle, He involved human beings....

-- that miracle that we cherish, the Incarnation -- God-come-to-us-in-human-form-to-be-our-Saviour - - even in the performance of that miracle, for you never really recognize Jesus Christ until you see Him as a miracle, it's beyond our human understanding, and none of us could ever have achieved what Jesus Christ did for us. And yet, I say to you, when He saw fit to do what He did in Jesus Christ, He had to involve people. We could never have had Jesus without Mary....without Joseph.

Today's miracle is a very interesting one. I'm not going to read it for you from sacred writings. I'm going to recall it for you. Maybe some of you have been fortunate enough to have read it when you got last week's MESSENGER

...there are people, you know, who do that - they check out the sermon title, the Scripture passage -- we even have a member of this congregation who when she moved to Denver, Colorado, could never quite think of herself being separated from this parish... she asked to be enrolled as an associate member. And would you believe me when I tell you that whenever she gets Saint Luke MESSENGER, she has a hymnal -- she reads the words of all the hymns...she recalls some of the music that Mr. Rowland has chosen as she heard it when she lived in Germany, if he should choose something by a German composer.....and then she reads the Scripture lessons, notes the sermon reference and checks that out too.....

Let me encourage you, when you read the MESSENGER, to read in advance the Scripture passage as well.

Well, this is the second chapter of Mark....Jesus came back to a place where He had been before. It was pretty much His headquarters in Galilee, a village named Capernaum. And when He had been there before He was speaking in the synagogue -- you may recall we talked about this in last Sunday's sermon -- He was interrupted by a person who was possessed by a demon, and Jesus gave undivided attention to that person and then frees him from his demon-possession. And the man was restored to what he was meant to be.

Well, today's Scripture passage takes us back to Capernaum, Jesus returns for a second time. And when He returns He doesn't go this time to the synagogue, but He goes to someone's house. And the word spreads, of course, that He's there in town, and before you know it the house is filled with people.

Even the very entrance to the door is packed with people so that no one person could ever get inside the house beyond those who are already there. And, as is true when He had been there before, He's speaking and teaching to the people, and he's interrupted again.

This time He's interrupted not by people who are inside, not by people who are at the door, but by people who are up on the roof -- four fellows had gotten a paralytic, put him on a stretcher and carried him up on the outside stairway...

(those of you who have traveled in the Holy Land know how those houses are -- they're flat-roofed, usually one room, front door, stairway on the side, where on hot summer nights families could go up and cool off in the evening -- the roof was made rather flimsy, not too sturdy construction)

...and these fellows carrying this paralytic had parted the mud and the twigs and the branches and made an opening. Gingerly and very adroitly they let the fellow down right in front of Jesus, and, as was true before, Jesus gave the man undivided attention and told him his sins were forgiven and he was to get up and to walk. And that's exactly what he did.

Now I need to say this to you quite parenthetically -- did you notice what I said? - - - "as before, He was interrupted . . ." I must preach you a sermon sometime on interruptions. In company with you, I don't like interruptions. There are two times in particular when I don't like to be interrupted - - when I'm sleeping, and when I'm eating. But sometimes when we set out on our day's course we have only so much time to do certain things, and we're not able to permit ourselves a margin of time, and then we're interrupted.

Now I'm going to give you the benefit of a lesson that I have been learning. I try not to be unduly troubled when in the course of my day's work I am inter-

rupted. No matter what else I've said to you, I try not to be annoyed by it because I take a page from the book of the village priest, a good man of God, who after he had been interrupted a number of times, came to the conclusion that his interruptions were his work, and they needed attention too. There isn't a mother in the world who doesn't understand....a mother of two kids, three kids, four kids -- her day is just one interruption after another with needs that have to be met. So Jesus, getting along swimmingly in what He was teaching those people, was interrupted and we remember what happened that day because He paid attention when He was interrupted and did the thing that had to be done at that particular moment.

Now, what I really want to tell you in this sermon, and time is going quickly to the close, is that you have to notice three things about these four fellows.....

one . . . somebody among them took the initiative. There's nowhere in the Scriptures that someone gave them the directive to do this, but one of them, or all four of them, as soon as they thought of Jesus Christ, thought in terms of the paralytic, the man who couldn't possibly get there to that house to ask Jesus to do something for him....and one of these four, or all four of them together, I don't know, they decided among themselves that they would do this for this poor benighted chap.....

...there are any number of things in this world that ought to be done but never get done because people won't take the initiative, people won't act on their own to see that it gets done.

When I walk away from Saint Luke Church, one of the things that I'll remember especially that perhaps you never think of -- we used to have what we called the Linden Project -- there on Brookeville Road, that disadvantaged area, where certain deprived people lived, within a mile-and-a-half of where you're

seated right now - - - one of the most meaningful investments of time and energy on the part of the people of Saint Luke Church was done by a handful of people who went there, tutored some of those youngsters, provided them needed transportation, provided a very wonderful ministry in the name of Jesus Christ -- without any action being taken by this congregation formally, without any directive from the Committee on Social Ministry, without any vote on the part of Church Council. But a couple of them simply took the initiative, and didn't wait for somebody else to give the order. It's amazing to discover sometimes the good that can be done when somebody acts on his own to get something moving. That's the first thing I need to tell you about how this miracle happened, because somebody took the initiative to bring the fellow to Jesus Christ.

The second thing that needs to be noted, and you may not have thought of this: it required some effort - - not only initiative, but effort, to carry a fellow bodily - - who knows what distance they had to bring him? And then to be persistent enough that when they came to the door and found out that you couldn't get in, and people around weren't about to part and make an opening and say, "Okay, we'll help you, if you fellows are kind enough to do this, the least we can do is to see that the fellow gets in the front door!" - - but with some effort now, they balanced this paralytic on this make-shift stretcher, and taking him up step by step, and then when they get him on the roof, to balance him so that he doesn't fall off....and each fellow holds his own rope and well enough that he gets him right in front of Jesus Christ.

And the third thing that we've got to notice is the more important than the others: they honestly believed that Jesus Christ could do for this fellow what nobody else could do. I'm going to repeat: They honestly believed that Jesus Christ could do for him what nobody else could do. It paid off magnificently for them because Jesus Christ did even more than they expected. Jesus

Christ not only cured him of his affliction, but also forgave him his sins!

Be patient with me when I tell you that sometimes I'm annoyed by people who don't pay much attention to miracles, because they say they're "out of this world." By deliberate attempt I have tried to get you to understand now that this miracle did happen, but it would never have come off if it hadn't been for this quartet, these four husky fellows, who helped to see that it would occur.

There is no question in my mind, there's any amount of good that God wants to let loose in this world, the only limitation is that there aren't enough of us who will make ourselves available so that the thing can be channeled through us, and accomplished....

....now that's something to
think about, even on a day such as this.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "TO GOD BE GLORY"
Luke 18:35-43

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

As I look back to the days when we had two growing boys in the parsonage, I remember how there were three Bible stories in particular that I used to delight in telling them when I put them to bed at night. Let me read one of those Bible stories for you now. In my judgment it's one of the grandest and most poignant of all the passages in the New Testament. It's recorded in the 18th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"And it came to pass as he was come nigh unto
Jericho, a certain blind man sat by the way
side begging:
And hearing the multitude pass by, he asked
what it meant.
And they told him, that Jesus of Nazareth
was passing by.
And he cried, saying, Jesus, thou Son of David,
have mercy on me.
And they which went before rebuked him, that
he should hold his peace: but he cried so much
the more, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me.
And Jesus stood, and commanded him to be
brought unto him: and when he was come near, he
asked him,
Saying, What wilt thou that I shall do unto
thee? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my
sight.
And Jesus said unto him, Receive thy sight:
thy faith hath saved thee.
And immediately he received his sight, and
followed him, glorifying God: and all the people,
when they saw it, gave praise unto God."

I'm not suggesting that we do this morning what half-heartedly I entertained as a possibility -- it would have been something entirely different and I'm not so sure that you would have fully appreciated it, because it could end up perhaps in a bit of chaotic behavior. But if I have whetted your interest at

at all, let me tell you what it is that I had in mind: on the basis of this passage of Scripture that I have just read, and in order for you to better appreciate it, this is what might have happened this morning: at this precise moment, now, I could have given the signal, and maybe 10-20 people would walk down the aisles of Saint Luke, each holding in his or her hand a supply of bandages to be applied as a blindfold....and then each of you, every single person here present, would be asked to cooperate, and all of you would be blindfolded.....and this would remain so for at least 20-25 minutes...

...and then after a while perhaps I could suggest -- and here's where chaos would enter -- that you stand up, you move around.

Why would I suggest this kind of exercise? Much for the same reason, I think, as that grand and good school teacher who used to have what she called "Sightless Days" once or twice in the course of the year. She'd blindfold her pupils, her youngsters, for a period of time, because she never wanted it to be said that any youngster went out from under her influence without having a remarkable appreciation for the gift of sight. Of all of our gifts, of all of our senses, it's the one, isn't it now, that we'd want to give up the least?

-- that school teacher -- maybe she had a mother who was going blind and she knew what it was to live with someone with failing vision....

-- maybe she herself was becoming older and she dreaded the day when she could no longer do needlework, and perhaps be denied her driver's license because of faulty vision....

-- maybe she had a brother, or a cousin, who had been blinded by a terrible accident....

Whatever the reason, give her credit -- she knew and knew full well that most of us lack the proper appreciation for the gift of sight.

When God created the world He made it a perfectly beautiful world. Whenever I go back to the hills of home, my brother-in-law hears me say invariably, as he and I stand there and look at the hills, to the right, to the left, to the north, to the south, to the east and the west -- I say, "Karl, for God's sake, don't ever get used to it! Be thrilled every time you see it." God has placed us in a world that's touched by beauty, but how well do we use the faculty of sight?

-- did you know that there was a perfectly beautiful moon this morning, against a sky of solid blue with nary so much as a cloud?

-- incidentally, how many different shades of green have you noticed today as you came to church?

-- this morning, as I sat where you now sit, during the 8:00 o'clock Communion service, I was deeply moved by what I saw in the rose window -- the different shades of red and blue and gold, and the fairly delicate motion of a weaving branch of a tree....

-- I embarrassed him, honestly I did -- I didn't mean to -- they came together to the 8:30 service, walking the main corridor in the Christian Education Building, and I said, "Oliver, what color are Evalyn's eyes?" She of course answered quickly: "He doesn't know!"

....I suggest to you, sometime you look into the eyes of the person you love and read the lines of love upon her face or his face -- use your eyes to recognize the integrity and trust and affection that swells up in your eyes or that person's eyes when your eyes meet.

There's a fellow who tried it some time ago and his wife thought he was 'touched' when he said, "Just let me look at you!" -- not because he wanted to be able to

tell her that she had a perfectly beautiful face, but because he could read in her eyes what he, as one person, needed so much to know -- there was another person in this world who looked upon him hopefully, with affection and with esteem.

So I could go on and on and on, but I'm not here so much to talk about physical sight -- precious as it is -- which reminds me hurriedly to recall for you now what happened on that day in Jericho.....a blind man, Bartimaeus, sat by the wayside begging. Hearing the multitude going by, he asked "What's going on here? What does this mean?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by" and he cried for all he was worth to get the attention of Jesus, because he honestly believed that Jesus would restore for him his sight.

As a devout Jew, no doubt, he'd been taught to believe -- they'd referred to him as the Messiah, and they cherished the thought -- are you aware of that: that one of the things ancient Israel wanted most when the Messiah would come was not so much political freedom.....as there were those who said, when the Messiah comes he will give light to those who sit in darkness. And among all the miracles that Jesus performed, they valued greatly the fact that He gave sight to those who were blind. And this man believed that if this is the Messiah, this is what he could do!

Jesus commanded that he be brought to Him and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" And as I've thought I've told you on occasion, if Jesus had not asked that question I'd say, what a foolish question! -- what would a blind man want most?

...who was the great king who accidentally, with his bow and arrow blinded one of his faithful trusted servants....moved with compassion he went to his blinded servant and wanted to make amends, and offered him as much as half of his kingdom.
...and all the man made blind could say, "I want to see --

-- give me back my eyes!"

Well, let me say quickly, I've not come here this morning to talk so much about physical vision as I am the thing that's called spiritual vision -- a religious reading of life, one being able to see amidst all the confusion and clamor of life a God-directive. And in this regard many, many of us are blind. Many of us have never so much as ever been able to say that we have seen the face of God -- spiritually speaking. Many of us have never been able to say as we travel along the road of life, to see the signs, the directive, that keep us on the right path.

C. D. Jung, the noted psychologist, once wrote a book, "Modern Man In Search of a Soul" because he admitted, out of all the patients that he had seen, 35 years of age and older -- every single one of them suffered because of a lack of a religious outlook on life. And never would they fully regain what they should have had until they were possessed with an appreciation for the God-factor in life.

I suggest to you as strongly as I can that most of us spend our life as one long night, spiritually speaking -- blind to spiritual truth, impervious to the God-directive. Blind beggar Bartimaeus is one of my favorite characters in the New Testament, favorite because I'm always impressed by the fact that he did not remain content in his affliction, who honestly believed that life had something better to offer him....to honestly believe that that something better could be given to him only by the hand of God. When he had his chance, he made the most of it.

But I'm even more thrilled when I tell you that when he received from the hand of God the blessing that only God could give, he used that blessing following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. What good is sight if a man should never find anything worth looking at? Blind Bartimaeus received his sight, kept his focus on God.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "TO UNDERSTAND A MIRACLE"
(Mark 5: 25-34)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The sermon series on the general theme of Miracles continues. Today the sermon bears the title, "To Understand A Miracle" and the text is the 30th verse of the 5th chapter in the Gospel according to Mark:

"And Jesus immediately knowing in himself
that power had gone out of him, turned
around in the crowd and said, 'Who touched
my clothes?' . . . "

It was a miracle that happened on the way of another miracle that was about to occur. You need to understand that. The word had gotten out very quickly that Jesus was within reach. The first thing that was brought to His attention was that the 12-year-old daughter of the beloved president of their synagogue was dying. They implored Jesus to heal her, do something about it. He undoubtedly indicated his intention to go with them....a crowd quickly formed, as well you might understand. Healers didn't come to town every day, and surely none of the caliber as of this one! Let's say it again -- the crowd quickly formed....

....and as He was on His way to perform the miracle for the 12-year-old daughter of a highly esteemed man, this 12-year-old was dying -- the crowd pushed and shoved. He could hardly make His way, as eager as He was to be of help...

And in that shoving, pushing crowd -- dare I say it? -- she was little, she was frail, a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years. She was seizing the moment that the healer was within reach, and that's about all that she could do -- simply reach, deeming herself, presumably, unworthy -- she got down on

her hands and knees, as He happened to stand still for a moment....grovelling in the dust, she touched the hem of His garment that was dragging in the dirt.

...for she reasoned within herself, If only I could touch the hem of His garment, He'd heal me....

And that's exactly what happened! And once it happened, Jesus Christ, this powerful presence of compassion, turned and said: "Who touched me?"

The disciples almost ridiculed their Master and said, "Who touched you? -- what a question! Look around you -- people everywhere! Everybody's touching you! -- and now you want to know who in particular?" It could well be that the woman identified herself now, and told her story unashamedly:

"I couldn't stop the blood for twelve years, Master,
I've gone from one physician to another, I've spent
all the money that I have -- I'm bankrupt. And then
I heard you were here. I did not presume so much as to
make bold as to ask you, I simply believed if I could
touch the hem of your garment, that you would heal me."

And Jesus turned and said to her, she could go her way now -- her faith had made her well.

I'd be less than honest if I were to tell you that many a scholar says that she began with very little faith, and some people said she was superstitious. There are people like that, you know, who settle very easily for the fringe of things, and think that there is some merit, perhaps, by just touching the outer edges....

...don't think of me unkindly if I were to tell you that some people settle very easily for just coming to church -- as though they were just touching the fringe, and as though that would do the trick....

...there are some people who drop names -- they had a great-uncle who was a preacher, and as though simply by touching

that fact, the gates of Heaven would automatically open....

There are some people who settle very easily for touching only the fringe of things.

There are some people who sell that little woman short, who say she really didn't have much faith. But I'm happy to tell you, in my book she had enough faith to get a miracle.

And how much faith does it take to get a miracle? Maybe not very much, really -- but enough to get one started, enough to put yourself in a place where one can happen. And to her everlasting credit, her faith was not in herself. While you may settle very easily for the fact that she touched the hem of His garment, she had faith in the one who was wearing the garment. And that's exactly what Jesus Christ wanted to make plain to her. He did not settle for allowing her to believe that touching the fringe was enough. With the power going out of Him, He turned and said, "Who did it?" -- as though He didn't know. But she needed to be confronted with the look in His eyes, the strength of His personal concern. For God deals with all of us as though there were only one of us.

To understand a miracle you begin with the element of faith, but you don't end with the element of faith. It is never enough to have faith in faith. For the Christian it has to be faith in the person of God. It is not my faith that works the miracle, it is God who works the miracle. We must always remember that. Wanting in itself is never enough....praying in itself is never enough. The important thing is: to whom does one pray? -- and in whom does one have faith?

A person could cry out and cry out and cry out, but if there were none to help, and none to heed, we would be of all people the most miserable. To understand this miracle correctly, let me remind you that the shoving and the pushing and the shouting and the yelling of life....there comes one our way who is God Himself, and as He comes our way He has the power and the presence to make us well.

But alas for so many of us, we spend our money on those who cannot help us. We dissipate our energies in the directions that are futile. The miracle does not lie in the woman who had faith; the miracle lies in Jesus Christ, who came her way and was able to heed her prayer. With all the strength that I can command, let me remind you again and again, always coming our way is Jesus Christ, who alone can satisfy the deepest need. I beg you, don't wait until the time of desperation to meet Him! "To prayers -- all is lost -- to prayers!" is the cry of the mariner in the tempest. The true prayer was never meant to be a sudden introduction to the Pilot of Life. True prayer was meant to establish an ongoing, vital relationship at the earliest possible time.

You may never know when the moment will arrive when your faith will return its greatest dividend, but happy indeed is he who is making continual investmentand when the time comes he will cry out, but never in vain.

* * * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "THE TOUCH OF GOD"
(Luke 5: 12-16)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The sermon series on the general theme of MIRACLES continues. Today's sermon bears the title: "The Touch of God" and the text is the 40th verse of the first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark:

"And Jesus put forth his hand and touched
him, and immediately the leprosy departed
from him . . ."

I am about to read for you now something that in all fairness I must admit that some of you will believe; and with equal candor I must admit, some of you may find it very, very hard to believe, or some of you may even go so far as to disbelieve completely. Be that as it may, for the moment grant me the courtesy of listening to me now for what I am about to read from the Good Book:

"While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy, and when he saw Jesus he fell on his face and besought him, Lord, if you will you can make me clean. And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, I will. Be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him. And he charged him to tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to the people. But so much the more the report went abroad concerning him, and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. And then Jesus withdrew to the wilderness and prayed . . ."

Let it be said again, some of you will believe that without any difficulty at all -- a leper, walking death, came into the presence of Jesus Christ, and with whatever strength he could muster, he cried out for healing. And Jesus Christ put forth his hand and touched him, and immediately the body that was diseased was restored to health.

That's the way the Bible says it happened. I believe it. And I would be less than fair and honest in my calling if I did not state that. I believe in the power of God, I believe in the wisdom of God, I believe in the compassion of God. And I would not want to live a single day if I could not believe that somewhere in this world there is let loose on occasion some evidence of power and wisdom and compassion that's beyond my understanding.

I'm quick to tell you, however, that there are people who may not be able to believe that this leper was cleansed immediately, who will not hesitate, when they are suffering from a disease, to go to a physician and receive a prescription, to undergo treatment....and perhaps after a period of weeks and months find themselves restored to health -- nonetheless that same person might be unwilling to accept this miraculous, sudden healing.

Now if you can't subscribe wholeheartedly, if you cannot accept the record as it's stated, then let me beg you as best I can to accept what good you can glean from this passage of Scripture -- from a human perspective. It was Mark Twain, God bless him, who said that in the final analysis it wasn't what he couldn't understand that was in the Bible that really bothered him -- it was what he could understand that caused him a great deal of grief on occasion.

Now having said that, let me plead with you, then, to try to understand as best you can the element of truth which you can apply to your own satisfaction and for all of us who are part of the Christian family.

The sermon very properly bears the title: "The Touch of God," and if nothing else can be made plain in this sermon this morning, let that be established, that Jesus Christ touched the leper....

...I touched a leper once. On that special assignment in India, I went to where the lepers were. Frankly, it took a bit of doing on my part to take this hand of mine and touch a leper. I was strengthened and undergirded by the missionary who

stood by my side and said, "Go ahead, don't be afraid." -- a leper was walking death, a most unattractive person. Death was all that he had to look forward to, and the stamp of death was upon him or her. Let me say it again -- a most unattractive figure . . .

...and yet Jesus Christ went and touched that person.

Let me talk to you about this business of touching people. I spoke with our Associate Pastor last evening and I said sometime we ought to make a study of slogans that come out of Madison Avenue and then apply them to Scriptural truths, or to certain tenets of the Christian religion....

...you recognize this one: WE TRY HARDER

-- the sequel in Scripture is: "Be ye perfect" -- strive after that which is beyond you!

...WHEN YOU CARE ENOUGH TO SEND THE VERY BEST

-- the sequel to that as far as Scripture is concerned:

"For God so loved the world that He gave Himself, His Only Begotten Son"

...A BETTER IDEA

-- the sequel to that is found in Paul's closing verse in that 12th chapter of that first letter that he wrote to Christians who lived in the wicked city of Corinth:

"And now I will show you a more excellent way"

....and God's better idea is always the way of love, and there follows Paul's great treatise, his great hymn on Love.

But for our purpose this morning, the one which grips me:

REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE

That's the theme song, basically, of the Christian religion, for if Christianity

is anything, it most certainly is personal. You can't possibly understand Jesus Christ without coming to the conclusion that He was a person who was interested in persons. After He had finished His earthly pilgrimage, people had tried to appraise Him and try to put down a one-liner here and a one-liner there as to the kind of person He actually was. And they remembered Him with joy in their hearts when they said He was the kind of person who "went around doing good."

...they also said, sublimely, "He was a friend of sinners." You can't possibly be a friend in a detached kind of way. You can't possibly do good without becoming involved with people, relating to them, identifying with them.

If Christianity is anything, it most certainly is personal. And my soul is somewhat charged with joy when I realize that as I study the miracles that He performed, aside from the nature miracles, aside from the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand -- they were all on a one-to-one basis, where He identified and related to one person in particular. Even when He fed the five thousand, He fed the five thousand because He was thinking in terms of five thousand single individuals, each of whom was hungry.

....you can't think of Jesus Christ without thinking of Him as the personification of Love. You can't possibly love at arm's length -- reach out -- and touch someone.

We're all being touched by people, for good, or for ill. Some people touch us, and we become cynical. Some people touch us, and we suffer a measure of despair....

...some people touch us, and we begin to hate;

...some people touch us, and we begin to hope, and have confidence.

I sat yesterday with two people in my study here at the church --

-- one whose life was absolutely radiant -- a whole new chapter is being written because suddenly her life has been touched by

one person in particular who's paying attention to her --
giving her a reason to live and to hope...

-- the other person with whom I sat and listened, for 45 minutes,
was a person who was taking me to task -- and you as well --
because she gave me to understand that she comes to this
place quite often on a Sunday, and to all intents and purposes
I am the only person who touches her -- by that she meant I
am the only person who speaks to her. No one else, according
to her, pays attention to her. She feels short-changed, she
feels we're less than what we ought to be.

Now I know very well that some of you come to this church and you're very
happy you can come and go without anybody speaking to you -- you don't need peo-
ple to speak to you. You can get along very well without other people. But
there are some people who cannot. To love is to meet the need in the life of
a person. Was it Emily Dickenson who said, God bless her! --

"They may not need me, yet they might!
I'll let myself be just in sight;
A smile so small as mine may be
Precisely their necessity!"

My life has been changed by people who have touched me -- touched me by
the way they have looked at me. My life has been altered by people who have
refused to look at me, who have ignored me. My life has been challenged by
people who have touched me, as they have inspired me to be more than I have
been. And that's your testimony as well.

We're all influenced by the way we're being touched. And I'm happy to
tell you from my vantage-point, that God is always reaching out to touch us,
and God is reaching out to touch us through people. It's a curse upon us in
this day of computers, electronic devices, where we're shut off from people.
It's a curse upon us when sometimes we're only a number in the sight of other

people. We haven't adopted it here in Saint Luke, but I like the way it's put in that Baptist church in the South, where in every Sunday's bulletin they read these words: "Where everybody is somebody."

Some years back they computerized the village post office in England. And there was the dear lady who when she came and found out what had happened, lamented: "Who now is there to ask about my rheumatism?" Granted you may not be able to fully appreciate the touch of Jesus Christ by which a man's body was cleansed from leprosy, from the human perspective, then I beg you to appreciate the fact that Jesus Christ is willing to recognize the need of the person, to recognize that the diseased person was still a person -- unattractive as he was.

Quite frankly, from the stand-point of the Church, no sinner is very attractive. You know how nauseated you can become sometimes when you see someone in front of you who is the personification of evil. We Christians brand ourselves sinners in the sight of God . . . sin isn't very attractive. But one of the grandest verses in all Scripture is this:

"That while we were yet sinners, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself . . ."

...that's simply saying, "God came and touched us." -- reach out! touch someone! -- in the name of Christ. Every single one of us, whatever good we can muster to our credit we have, thanks to the touch of somebody else, who either gave it to us.....or drew it out of us.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE GOOD NEWS OF EASTER"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Ephesians 1:20

He was a villager in England who had survived World War I. Not long after that, when there were war clouds threatening anew, he is supposed to have said, "If they tell me there is poison gas spewed upon us in the neighborhood, I will not reach for a poison-gas mask, nor will I seek shelter in a place where I will be made free from the poisonous fumes. Rather, I will go out into the streets, and I will sniff for all I am worth, and I will say: 'That's it! The game is up!'"

At the outbreak of World War II another Britisher looked out across the English Channel, and as he looked at Europe he lamented and said: "The lights of Europe are going out one by one, and I do not think that I will see them go on again in my lifetime."

The man who is standing at the sacred desk now, on Sunday, December 7, 1941, walked into a room where a baby was sleeping, and having heard the news of Pearl Harbor, he sighed as he mused and looked upon that child and said: "This child will grow up and become a man, and throughout all the days of his years he will have to deal with the scars of the wounds of this conflict."
.....It was not a happy thought.

....nor was it a happy thought for the man who said,

"The lights are going out one by one, and I
shall not see them come on again . . ."

....nor was it a happy thought for the man who said,

"I will sniff the fumes of the poison gas,
and I will say the game is up . . ."

There are those who characterize this day in which you and I live as a time of despair. There are those who have lived as long as they have and say, "I should live so long! -- to face a world such as this! This is the day when cynics have a field day, no matter where you look -- despair, despondency, discouragement, disillusionment, defeat...eventually death itself. Who escapes it?

I can readily understand, however, the man who said, "As far as tomorrow is concerned, I am a pessimist." But I am delighted to be numbered in his company because he could also say, " . . . but as far as the day-after-tomorrow is concerned, I am an optimist." For he spoke as a true Christian. For Christians are optimists, because they are of the Easter Generation.

But that does not mean that we live in a world where there is no despair, despondency, disillusionment, discouragement, defeat, or even death itself. It doesn't seem to escape many people.

And one of the saddest things that we read upon the current scene now is that seeping into the younger generation there are more suicides now than ever before among teenagers. Let me read for you the suicide note of a 19-year-old:

"I made a bargain with God," she said. " . . . I told God that life wasn't turning out as I would like to have it turn out and I gave God a year in which to do something about it. And if there would be no change, then I would end it all.

...well a year has come and gone, and God hasn't come through . . . "

What she didn't know was that she wasn't the first to believe that, and she wasn't the first to think that, and she wasn't the first to try to bargain with God....and she wasn't the first to try to write the terms of life according to her own pleasure.

There are those who saw a man die upon a cross outside a city wall, and they suffered defeat, and despair, and despondency, discouragement, disillusionment to a degree.....and seemingly defeat. But the sad thing is, God never seems to get across to us, does He, that there's always another chapter to be written, there's something beyond defeat.....there is something beyond despair.....there is something beyond death! God is the Supreme Author, and God wants to have us understand about the book of Life which He has written, if only we give Him a chance to introduce us to His next chapter.

When the news first came to the British people about Wellington's encounter with Napoleon, it was only relayed to a degree, for some reason which I can't relate now - - only part of the news came through. This is what they first got, only this message: "WELLINGTON DEFEATED"

.....it was only later on that they got the

finish to the sentence: "WELLINGTON DEFEATED NAPOLEON"

To those people who gathered at Calvary, for a while they only got part of the sentence - - "Jesus Christ is dead!"

I have not come to this sacred desk this morning to talk about a man who lived and died. That became very real to me when in company with some of you I went to Jerusalem. When I first went there one of the places I most wanted to visit was the Resurrection Garden and the Garden Tomb. I went reverently, as you might presume I would, and I stood inside that place where there was an empty grave. I was not deeply stirred! I am happy to tell you, my soul is far more on tiptoe when I can be with a people such as you, even now, and catch the dynamic and the vitality of your Christian experience.

While it's understandable that I should not be thrilled,

...because I have not come to talk to you about a grave that was made empty - - but I have come to talk to you about a

Christ who was let loose in the world! - - about the man who wasn't there, because He happens to be here!

...I am not come to talk to you about a Christ who lived and died - - I have not come to talk to you about a Christ who once came . . .

....the Easter message is: He who came -- comes!

And He who lived and suffered and died now lives!

Many a preacher facing a congregation such as you right now is saying what I am about to say to you: You're here now either because you believe it to be true, or you wish that it were! Man was not made simply to live out the days of his years and die. Man was made to live qualitatively, so that each day he can live in the power of the Resurrected Christ.

I can say this to you on good authority. For there was a man who was a preacher who went around Asia Minor a long time ago -- he was a tent-mender by trade -- and one of the things that upset him when he came to a group of Christians in Ephesus was that they lacked the dynamic, they lacked the triumphant quality to their lives, they were very lack-lustre. So he did what a preacher frequently does for his people, he got on his knees and he prayed. I am happy to tell you that I can share a smidgen of that prayer with you now, for he wrote those Christians in Ephesus a letter, and this is what he had to say in that letter:

" . . . and how tremendous - - "(as though they had forgotten) " . . is the power available to us who believe in God --that power, the same divine energy which was demonstrated in Jesus Christ when He raised Him from the dead . . . "

Christians ought not to be lack-lustre, they ought to live triumphantly -- not just somehow - - - but they ought to live victoriously. And the good news

of Easter is that Jesus Christ who lived and died, lives and enables you and me to live -- not as children of defeat, but as people of hope.

A young writer once went to J. M. Barrie and said, "I have written a book, and I've succeeded very well, I think . . ." --

proud author that he was, and he said,

"Kind sir, would you do me a favor? -- would you read the book for me, and then give me a title for the book. I can't quite come up with a title."

J. M. Barrie said, "You keep your book, I don't even have to read it, but I will help you with a title and I'll tell you how I'll do it -- I am going to ask you two questions....and as you answer those two questions, maybe I can give you a title....

-- the first question is: In this book that you've written, sir, are there any drums?"

And the author said, "No -- no drums."

Then J. M. Barrie said, "Have you any trumpets in that book?"

And the author said, "Come to think of it, no, there are no trumpets."

And J. M. Barrie said, "There's your title: WITHOUT DRUMS
AND WITHOUT TRUMPETS . . ."

And that's the sad fact of many a story that you and I have encountered in people: they live out the days of their years without drums and without trumpets.

Christians are meant to march to the beat of God's drums -- triumphantly -- victoriously.

Winifred and I met her in what we might have called, had we not been of the Christian faith, a God-forsaken place -- a little village in Liberia called Wozi. She and others had actually, physically, carved a road into

that little village where people lived in devastation, greatly, miserably deprived . . . but there she is as a Christian. I said to her, "Margaret, how do you endure this -- how do you get up and face another day?"

....she began to gleam, and she said, "Strange as it may seem, in this village there's a chap who has a drum, and at the crack of dawn he begins to beat it. That's how I

begin my day -- to the beat of a drum, all around me . . . "

....cause for devastation and despair, but she had a spring in her step because she marched to the beat of a different drummer.

What the world needs today more than anything else is to march to the beat of a different drummer. And that drummer is God -- who raised up Jesus Christ from the dead. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed
as recorded)

MIRACLES: "FOUR DAYS LATE"
(John 11)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

It was one of those plantation gardens in Alabama that opened to the public, and we, of course, took advantage of the opportunity to stop. As we strolled along amid all the beauty, I sat down to rest. Not long thereafter he came in my direction -- I was hoping, of course, that he'd have enough strength to get to the bench where I was seated....

....he was bent by the years, his face was wrinkled, his hair was white, his face was as black as the ace of spades....

In short order, as you might suppose, I engaged him in conversation. I began by saying, "I have reason to believe you must have had a wonderful mother." He admitted proudly that he had.

I said, "If you don't mind, may I suggest to you that I believe that God is real to you," . . . and that's all that I had to say.... I shan't tell you now all that he related to me, but for the purpose to be served as far as this sermon is concerned, he said: "I'll tell you one thing about Him in particular -- He doesn't always come when you want Him to, He doesn't always show up when you call. But He has His own schedule -- and as far as He's concerned, He's always on time, and He's never late!"

You'll keep that in mind now, won't you, as this sermon unfolds, the sermon which is another in the series on the general theme of the miracles performed by our Blessed Lord. The title for today's sermon is: "Four Days Late." The text is from the 11th chapter of the Gospel according to John, the 27th verse -- the words are the words of one of two sisters of a brother who had died.

There were two sisters, named Mary and Martha. The brother was Lazarus. There was a home in Bethany where they lived to which Jesus had gone repeatedly. I remember when I began my ministry, one of the first things I learned about my predecessor was that there was a certain home to which he could go so easily and relax when he had had a long, hard day, and to know something of the peace of understanding people. Bethany must have been like that for Jesus Christ, human as He was. And the Bible gives us to understand that ever so often He went there -- the last good meal that He had before the terrible events of the concluding part of that last week He had at Bethany.

Now I should tell you this, that Mary and Martha discover that their brother, Lazarus, of whom it was said Jesus loved him dearly -- had died. Now, you have been in this situation, of course you have, but when death comes to a loved one, the first thing it seems that you want to do is to get the word to somebody that together you love. You just can't wait until that person's informed. Well that's exactly what happened here between Mary and Martha -- "Get word to Jesus -- let Him know." They got word to Jesus: Lazarus was dead.

...but now something sets in that you and I find it very difficult to appreciate -- Jesus did not behave the way you and I would have behaved. Knowing you as I do, in all likelihood you would have dropped whatever you were doing, and you couldn't possibly wait until you got there to be by the side of those whom you love, where grief had set in -- you would want to share their sorrow, if only to be in their presence.....

Jesus did not turn to His disciples and say, "Peter, you're in charge -- I'll be back after a bit -- I've got to get to Bethany right away" . . . He made no arrangements to leave at all! To the contrary, He stayed. And when He did go to Bethany, to all intents and purposes He was four days late. And

when He came, He was greeted by one of the two sisters. I'll read you what she said. Now you tell me, once I've read this text, --

-- was it a vote of confidence?...or a vote of no confidence?

...or was it a little bit of both?

-- was there an element of disappointment? was there an element of trust? ...or both?

It's a tremendous text. For shame upon you, that you haven't given it more attention than you have.

I think I can say that rather fairly. This is the way it reads:

"And Martha, one of the two sisters, said to Jesus (their friend, and especially a friend to the brother who had died) 'Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died - - and even as things are, I know that whatever you ask God, God will give it to you.'"

Now what do you make of the text -- suppose you were the preacher --

...a vote of confidence? -- or a vote of no-confidence?

...element of disappointment...or a sign of trust?

...the reaction of one whose burden of grief is very great

...a little bit of both!

And that's what makes the text as wonderful as it is: "Lord, if only you would have shown up sooner, you could have spared us so much...but nonetheless," she says, "I have not given up my belief of what you are able to do."

I frankly confess to you that when I study the miracles, this one of the raising of Lazarus is not listed among my favorites. From a purely human point of view, I fail to appreciate it, at least at a certain time in my life, because I said, "So what?" - - "why bring a man back from the dead who eventually will die?"

....I suppose I could have reasoned the same way when
Jesus fed the five thousand: "So what? Why feed them

today -- how about next Tuesday, they're going to
be just as hungry, aren't they?"

But what the years have taught me in my regard for the Holy Bible is this great appreciation for John, my favorite of the Gospel writers, because when John recorded miracles, he recorded them that they might serve as signs for us. And that's simply to suggest that we think not only of what was done, but we emphasize very strongly the purpose that's to be served in what was done. It isn't so much what it was that happened as it is the lessons we are to learn as to why the thing took place.

This is the Sunday after the glorious Easter day, and you never properly appreciate the meaning of Easter until you see how the power of God becomes effective in the Resurrection, the power of God to give life in the face of death. Which leads me to say to you that when you come to deal with this miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, recognize the sign that's to be served here, the design of God is that everyone of us should be a living, walking proof of His power.

And bear with me now as I ask you to recognize that that's the rationale that lies behind the performing of this miracle. Lazarus is raised from the dead that we might be able to appreciate the fact that God has the power to bring life out of death, life in the face of death. And that every single one of us ought to be the kind of a person who gives tribute to God because of His power to make us alive.

Now you may ask me, why didn't Jesus come immediately? Well, why don't we go back to my friend-of-one-day, who as long as God gives me memory will remain in my mind -- who said "I'll tell you one thing about Him: He doesn't always come when you want Him to, He doesn't always come when you call Him. But He always shows up, and according to His schedule He's always on time, and He's never late."

One scholar, and perhaps there are others to be numbered with him, main-

tained that Jesus did not come immediately because He never wanted us to believe, we human beings, that He's a god who can be dictated to, that He's a God who can be persuaded by our constant repetition of the cry for help. But what God does, John maintains according to this scholar, because it seems wise to God to do it. And God acts upon His initiative, and not according to ours.

What kind of a God would be worth loving and serving and praising if He could jump through the hoops at our command? Could you adore a God who was subject to the snapping of your fingers? There's something to be said for the fact that God's to be credited for the wisdom by which He can choose the time to act and to do what needs to be done.

There are scholars who maintain that you and I could never fully have appreciated the performance of this miracle if Jesus Christ had not waited four days. And some of us have lived long enough to know that that's the chapter that's written in our lives - - there are some things that have become exceedingly precious to us because God did operate according to His time schedule, and not ours. Some of us, looking back, can honestly say, well as far as He's concerned, He's always on time . . . as far as He's concerned, He's never late. And the years, if they have taught us anything, is to allow God to maintain His own time table.

The exceedingly precious thing is that God did give him life in the face of death. And that's really the meaning of Easter. That's what we celebrated last week, that's what we're meant to celebrate constantly -- that was the tremendous truth that was maintained by the Apostles, once they had Easter behind them, and empowered by the Pentecostal experience -- that now they were alive, by the touch of God. Lazarus came from the dead and lived and walked among them -- to demonstrate the power of God.

You may remember, when I began this series I told you that there were three things that you ought never to forget when you consider miracles: they're constantly dependent upon the power of God, the wisdom of God and the compassion of God. Miracles are meaningful for us because they can demonstrate the capability

of God. They have value for us because they illustrate His love. They are of worth to us because they can be trusted, because of His wisdom.

Now, before I walk away from this sacred desk, I want to be very fair and frank with you. I know there is a type of person who can't possibly appreciate the miracle of a dead man coming alive. You may read this 11th chapter of John for yourself, and you may be that kind of person, so constrained by your temperament and your personality that it makes no impact upon you at all. I believe that could be true for some of you. And if that should be true, then let me now before I walk away from this sacred desk tell you about something that happened after World War II.

Fifteen hundred of our men were coming back on a troop ship from the Far East. Robert McAfee Brown was the Chaplain to those men. As they had been aboard ship he was pleased to note that somebody came and said, "Chaplain, -- Padre -- provide us with a Bible study." For whatever their motivation, if only to pass time, he seized the opportunity, and he dealt with them, in his Bible study series, in the Gospel according to John. You'll have to take his word for it as I do: when they came to this 11th chapter, there was a man who stood up in the presence of the small company engaged in Bible study and said,

"I know what that chapter means!"

....and then he gave his personal testimony. He said, "I went into this war fresh out of college. I didn't want to go into the war. Every chance I had I went off the deep end -- I threw off all those restraining influences of home and church and loved ones. You name any sin -- and I thoroughly enjoyed it! But I want you to know that Jesus Christ came into my life and made me alive! -- He's rescued me from the depth of my sin, and I walk and live among you now with new life!"

Please don't misunderstand me, if the 11th chapter of the Gospel according to John doesn't turn you on, if you can't appreciate the raising of Lazarus

from the dead - - then I ask you to think very seriously about this modern-day Lazarus -- who bears testimony to the very thing that John said was the reason why Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead - -

"This happened -- that you may believe, and in believing, have eternal life."

....this I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "TO A TOWN CALLED NAIN"
Luke 7: 11-17

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The title for the sermon deserves careful reading. It's simply this:
"THE TOWN CALLED NAIN." And the text is the 11th verse of the 7th chapter of
the Gospel according to Luke:

" And it came to pass the day after
Jesus went into a city called Nain."

Would our disposition as a congregation be such, I could very easily,
I suppose, at this point in the sermon, expose you to something that had been
pre-designed, and I'll make you privy to what might have happened: I would have
gone over the entire parish register, and I would have anticipated those of you
who are present now, who had come from a town of a thousand-population-or-less,
a village or a hamlet -- 300 people -- 500 people -- 750 people....and then I
would suggest at this point in the service that you would stand and name that
village -- you who come here from all parts of the country. In all likelihood
I can predict the reaction of the rest of the congregation, particularly those
who have always lived in metropolitan areas -- two exclamations and a conclu-
sion which might be the reaction when you'd announce that little-known hamlet
from which you hail:

First exclamation: Never heard of it!

Second: Where in the world is it?

And the conclusion: Nothing much probably ever happened there!

" . . . and Jesus went into a town called Nain." Never heard of it! Some of
you are hearing about it today for the very first time, and unfortunately we
may be inclined to give a very human reaction: Nothing much probably ever hap-

April 20, 1990

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who have always lived in metropolitan areas -- two exclamations and a confir-
mation: which might be the reaction when you'd pronounce that little-known hamlet
that which you built:

Local Exclamations: Never heard of it!

Foreign: Where in the world is it?

And the conclusion: Nothing was probably ever happened there!

" . . . and Jesus went into a town called Naïn." Never heard of it! Some of
you are looking about it today for the very first time, and unfortunately we

pened there!

When this service is concluded, I'm going to head for the 'hills of home,' about 200 miles due north, in north central Pennsylvania. The name of the town is Montoursville -- chances are I'll tell those people tonight that 98% of you people never heard of it....I won't go so far as to say that some of you could believe that nothing good ever came out of it!

...but when I go back to Montoursville, which was a town of about 3,000 people when I grew up -- one bank, then we had two banks....one post office to which we'd go to get our mail...one meat market, then later on we were fortunate to have two....one school building, under whose roof all twelve grades were conducted -- everybody walked to school, carried his own lunch -- no such thing as a cafeteria.....

When I have time tonight I'll do a lot of deep reflecting. I'll think about what I knew when I lived in that small town. It was my world. Now, don't forget that -- no matter how small the place in which you happened to live for a period in your life, that's your entire world.

I used to do it, not fully realizing that Thornton Wilder had beaten me to it: write a letter, when I'd go away, and I'd send it back to a friend of mine in Montoursville. In addition to placing the person's name on the letter I'd say:

Montoursville, Pennsylvania
United States of America
Western Hemisphere
The Universe

....I could have gone one step farther, honestly I could have, and I could have put down, as the final statement: (beyond "Western Hemisphere, Universe") I could have put: "In the Mind of God." For what I want to say to you immediately now is no place is insignificant as far as God is concerned. And you and I do

people a disservice who come from small towns and give them a measure of discredit. Nothing is insignificant in God's sight -- to a city called Nain Jesus came.

If I wanted to I could give you chapter and verse as far as Montoursville is concerned -- relate for you certain sordid things that happened there in the days of my childhood. I could tell you how the town was shaken up by the murder that was committed, by the infidelities that were noised around town. I could also tell you about the great joys. I could tell you about the people whose lives were changed -- turned around completely -- with a lasting impact, as they faced forever in the direction of Jesus Christ -- it all happened there in that small town. Joy and sorrow....pain and plenty.

In a town called Nain Jesus came one day, and confronted a woman whose world had collapsed on her. Her whole world centered in that town. She was a widow, she had an only son. He died. Seemingly she was devastated. For in those days she, a widow, had no standing....in those days she anticipated whatever support she would need in her old age from her own son. Now he was dead.

For some people death can be a very miserable thing, and particularly when it comes to old age, when our faculties have gone and there's been one year after another of deterioration. I used the expression when my father died, at 90 years of age -- "a blessed release" . . . I used the same expression when my mother, with her bout with cancer, in her 80's had died -- "a blessed release." But for one who is young, seemingly with all of life yet to be lived, with responsibilities to be fulfilled, with needs to be met, especially on the part of those who depended upon him, what a tragic blow! And that's what confronted Jesus Christ when He went to that town called Nain, where that widow's world had collapsed.

What now? Into that little town called Nain comes Jesus Christ. Read about it for yourself in that 7th chapter of the Gospel of Luke -- it's the only

time that Nain is mentioned in the Bible. Luke is the only one who makes anything of it. But when he mentions it, he reminds us that no hamlet escapes the common ventures of life, and any place, no matter how insignificant, can still be within the reach of God.

And there in Nain we have the perfect demonstration of the love of Jesus Christ, of the seemingly undivided attention that God is willing to give a person, no matter where that person happens to be found, whose need is very great. So Jesus Christ performs the miracle -- He says to the dead man, "Arise!" The miracle is performed.

...and then Jesus very tenderly, with the utmost of compassion, gives the boy back to his mother -- "Your dreams can be renewed -- life can still be lived with hope and courage and confidence . . . "

Now, quite frankly, some of you might not be able to accept that miracle. None of you could ever picture yourself, in the name of Jesus Christ, saying to a dead form: "Get up!" -- and have life restored. I can't imagine any physician that I know attempting it, let alone a lay person. It may be difficult for some of you to accept the fact that that miracle was performed. I believe it was. Because I believe that Jesus Christ, an extraordinary person, could do extraordinary things. And I believe that the power of God was so real in the life of Jesus Christ, it was channeled through Him -- Christ could do it Christ did it.

But I beg you, don't get hung up on whether you can or cannot accept the fact that a dead person was restored to life. In the final analysis what matters most is not the event in itself as the truth that's inherent in the event, the meaning that goes with it.

When I go back to that small town in Pennsylvania tonight, it will be absolutely of little value for me to say, "So-and-so lived here" -- and just

recollect the name of the people who lived there. What will mean most to me is when I recall how their lives touched my life, the value of the relationship, the good that was let loose because such a thing occurred. So when you think of this, the miracle performed by Jesus Christ, gather courage in the realization that they could never think of what happened in Nain without thinking also that Jesus Christ had a concern for a troubled person -- that they could never think of what happened in Nain without thinking of the fact that God cared enough to show His compassion, God cared enough to renew hope.

When you travel in Scotland you may want to visit some of the castles. And like as not you might some day see a castle in Scotland where they will show you a cell where prisoners were kept....and you'll be deeply impressed by the fact that you can see the pressure marks of two hands on a window ledge, where prisoner after prisoner -- one in particular who for twenty years was kept in that cell, with all the strength that he could muster would hang there with his two hands by the window ledge....they'll also show you the pressure points on the stone on which he stood -- the dent is still there, as he looked out into a world, a world that had made him a bit b¹tter, perhaps, wondering, as he surveyed that world with all that was sordid and miserable and devastating about it -- -- if somehow there couldn't be let loose in that world this person and that person who might care enough to show some measure of compassion and release a life-changing force!

...and that's how you read that miracle! Jesus Christ introduced the element, the precious ingredient, of a life-changing force.

I am fully aware of the fact that it didn't happen every day. But it did happen, as dramatic evidence that we're not left in this world, no matter where we may be, just to drift and to accept by fate what could be changed by faith.

And that's the story of the life of Jesus Christ while He was here on

earth. He never very easily, casually, accepted what other people called as inevitable. John the Baptist was in prison. Some say he was getting cynical, some say he was getting a bit bitter. He sent some emissaries to Jesus and said, "You ask Jesus now -- is he the one who was really meant to come or should we look for somebody else?" He honestly believed that somewhere, somehow there would come into this world someone who could show them a measure of love and compassion.

And what was the answer of Jesus Christ? - - "Go back, tell John what's happening -- the miserable ones are having attention paid to them...

...the blind are getting their sight....

...lame people are being able to walk....

...the diseased are being made whole....

...even the dead are being raised up

...go back and tell John that there is let loose in this world right now a life-changing force!

I have been telling you now about something that happened two thousand years ago about - - - two thousand years from now -- Silver Spring, Maryland?

...never heard of it! wonder where it was? not much probably ever happened there!.....

But the-chronicler-of-events with the mind of God will put down that we were here, and our lives were changed as we were touched by Jesus Christ, who paid attention to us. And that's a happy thought.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF FAITH"
(Mark 3: 1-6)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Today's sermon, another in the general series on Miracles Performed by our Blessed Lord, bears the title: "In An Atmosphere of Faith" Now the passage of Scripture that will hold you in good stead as this sermon unfolds, the introductory verses of the third chapter of the Gospel according to Mark. May I encourage you to listen carefully as the passage is read. You will need to remember every facet of this passage:

"And he . . . " (meaning Jesus) " . . . entered again into
the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered
hand. And they . . . " (meaning the Pharisees) . . . "watched
him, whether he would heal on the sabbath day, that they
might accuse him.

And Jesus said unto the man which had a withered hand, Stand
forth. And then Jesus said unto them . . . " (the Pharisees)
" . . . Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath day, or to do
evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace.
And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being
grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he said unto the
man, Stretch forth your hand. And he stretched it out, and
his hand was restored whole as the other.

And the Pharisees went forth and straightway took counsel
with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him . . . "

I'm sorry to have to tell you this, really there's nothing new about it. Some people go to church for the wrong reasons. In that synagogue of long ago,

when Jesus showed up there was a bunch of people on hand who were far from being radiant and easily given to praising God. Nor would it seem that they were crestfallen, a penitent pack of people, truly remorseful for their sins and eager to be pardoned. Still let it be said, they weren't much minded to gird themselves for some positive measure of action by which they could tear out into a troubled world and leave a track of miserable deeds behind them.

Now come to think of it, why should people come to church? If I were inclined to let each of you stand up now and give some measure of testimony, I think I could give you a reading right now of what the reaction might be. Any number of you would stand up and say you're here to give God praise for all the mercies that you have received in the course of the past week. Truthfully, of course, every single one of us is on the receiving end of God's mercies, and some of us come back here Sunday after Sunday for that reason: "Thank you, God -- thank you! You are gracious, and I am grateful."

One turns quickly to the other side of the coin, of course, for some of us realize that even though we have been benefiting by God's mercies, our track record since we were last here isn't very good. We haven't used everything that He gave us last Sunday to His glory. And by the time Friday came along some of us ran out of steam, and that is, some of us ran out of a forgiving nature.....and some of us weren't very patient with people -- we gave them short shrift, really we did. I'm not only echoing my own mind, I'm echoing some of the things I could hear you say.

-- some of us have come because we want to thank God for what He's given us.....

-- some of us are here also because we want Him to forgive us all over again for having fallen short and not having lived in the world as His obedient servants....

Now, these are the reasons that ought to bring people to church -- these are the right reasons.

But there was a bunch of people in that synagogue who were not there for these reasons. They, the Pharisees, were there for the wrong reasons. They had heard about a carpenter's-son-turned-preacher whose style of doing good was not exactly according to their style. They didn't much appreciate his manner of ministry -- they held him suspect, and they made up their minds if they ever had a chance, they would do him in, they'd watch his every action, they'd observe his every mistake, they'd build a case against him. They were waiting for their chance and they had it that day in the synagogue, so they thought. For when Jesus came in there was this atmosphere of hostility.... there was tension. You could almost cut it with a knife. It was readily evident.

There are people like that, you know. I once knew a person so ill-tempered that I could honestly believe that if I walked out into a corridor where he had passed by five minutes earlier and didn't see him, I could still sense that he had been there! It was in that kind of atmosphere that Jesus Christ went to church....

-- not in a company of people who were eager to give God praise

-- not with a company of people who were eager to go out into
the world and do good.....

-- not in a company of people who would be quick to stand up and put
their fingers to their lips and reverently whisper the name
of God when they found themselves in the presence of someone
such as Jesus Christ.....

What does one do, then, in a case like that, especially when Jesus Christ saw a man who was in need? -- a man with a withered hand....presumably had come back to church again and again and again, hoping that perhaps there would be those who would look upon him with some measure of sympathy. They had all their faculties, they had all of them that God had given them from the very beginning.

But now he had to go through life with his hand that was useless! And there he was, in an environment of hostility.

Now Jesus Christ worked miracles, you know that. You also know as you read the Scriptures that again and ever so often He was unable to work miracles because of their unbelief....which is simply to say there was no environment of faith, there was no atmosphere of trust. And you don't work miracles unless the atmosphere and the environment is conducive to that sort of thing.

So what happens? God be praised -- Jesus Christ does not allow any obstacles to stand in the way when good needs to be done. So if there is to be an environment of faith and trust, it's Jesus Christ who introduces it. There are people like that. One of the grandest things I think I ever heard said about President Eisenhower, that man who went around looking like everybody's grandfather -- they used to say of Eisenhower that he was the kind of person that when he walked into a room, people began to think together. Jesus Christ introduced an element, an ingredient of faith and hope and trust. He focused His eye upon the man with the withered hand.

It was an easy thing for Him to do because He loved people. It was an easy thing for Him to do because He was let loose in this world by God to do good things. It was an easy thing for Him to do because He was a carpenter's son! He knew how valuable a good strong hand could be when the day's craft had to be attended to. So in pure sympathy and pure concern, despite the environment of hostility and hate, He pays attention with grace and compassion to the man with the withered hand.

You've read it too casually, my friends -- you ought to be ashamed of yourself -- you showed no emotion, did you, when you discovered that Jesus Christ said to the man with the withered hand: "Stretch forth your hand!" It's the very thing that the man had been unable to do for years! How can a man with a paralyzed hand make it firm and stretch it out? I bring this to your attention for the simple reason: so strong was the ingredient of faith and trust that

Jesus Christ was introducing that it had this dramatic effect.

Do I have to remind you what Martin Luther kept telling us in the Explanation of the Third Article of the Creed -- the bottom line remains that you and I could not even think the thoughts of God if God didn't help us to think His thoughts. It's the Holy Spirit that enlightens us, gathers us together, nurtures us and makes it easy for us to respond to all that He offers. God is always trying to introduce that element of faith, and hope, and trust, to introduce that atmosphere by which we can respond to all that He wants to give. And that's what He did precisely. The miracle occurred because Jesus Christ, sensing the need to give the initiative to give to the man hope -- he does it. And you and I must not forget this in this troubled world, where so often we're inclined to accept the status quo.

Oh, -- -- I have something to tell you about these Pharisees -- they're an interesting bunch. They were so rigid in their concern for the Law that they said you didn't work on the sabbath, you couldn't do anything that looked like work on the sabbath. How crazy can you become in your concern for religion! As an example, if a man accidentally fell into a hole, and the side of the wall collapsed and he was covered with earth, according to their understanding of religion, you could go and unearth him to a degree -- which is to see if he was all right, and if he was all right, then you let him stay there, you wouldn't get him up out of the hole until the next day! -- when the sabbath was past!

I could give you chapter and verse of any number of things like this. And the upshot is that their religion was the kind of thing that was bent on keeping things from getting worse. Jesus Christ did not come into the world simply to keep things from getting worse. Jesus Christ came into the world to introduce a measure of improvement! -- not to accept them just as they are, and not simply to say "Let's try not to let the thing worsen!" But Jesus Christ says, "Let's

improve! Let's make it better!" And this is what Christians are meant to do! That's the meaning of eternal life. God gives us not just life as we share it in this world, but He improves upon it and gives us the guarantee of eternal life, that quality that means so much to all of us.

Before I walk away from this sacred desk I ask your indulgence as I recite something for you that you ought to hear. And my prefatory remark concerning it will be this: if some of you somehow cannot possibly appreciate the performance of this miracle on the man with the diseased or the paralyzed hand that became whole....if some of you can't understand how that happened, please then remember that it happened because Jesus Christ introduced the ingredient of hope, and created the atmosphere of faith and trust that otherwise was lacking -- now that's my prefatory remark for this chapter and verse that comes out of the life of this congregation. And chances are you would know nothing about it if I did not relate it for you now.

It happened a number of years ago, maybe six, maybe seven -- I've forgotten, the time passes quickly. She had come here for a meeting. I happened to see her in the corridor, and I was constrained by the Holy Spirit to say to her, "Before you leave, why don't we just stand in the Nave as I sometimes do, and offer a prayer"....and that's exactly what we did. And then we turned and went down the main corridor of the Christian Education Building, and just as we got by my office door she put her hand to her brow and said -- words that I scarcely remember now -- "I feel terrible"....and then she was stricken.

We called the rescue squad, they came as quickly as they could and did what I presume they felt they could do, and carted her off to the Washington Adventist Hospital, where, when I saw her even weeks later -- I with my little faith con-signed her to be a vegetable for the rest of her life.....

Her husband took an early retirement. He would never have put it in these words, but this is what he was saying to himself: "I will not accept it just as

it is! And I will not be content in just trying to keep it from getting worse. With all the energy that God gives me, and by His strength I will do what I can to see that the situation improves."

....I can still see him trying to form words for her to speak, in the seemingly endless weeks that passed into months....I can still see him with all the tenderness and compassion, massaging her arms and strengthening her muscles. Today -- she writes beautiful letters.

Today -- she's fully restored.

I call it a miracle. Another miracle by the grace of God through Saint Luke Church -- it happened here.

It would never have happened if that man would simply have said, "My mission in life is to keep things from getting worse" -- who looked upon his mission in life to make things better by the grace of God.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "TO DELAY IS NOT TO DENY"
(Matthew 15:21-28)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Let me begin by asking what could be in your judgment a very foolish question: Which is more important, the beginning of a story, or the ending?

Oh, you could counter very quickly, and I would understand -- it all depends how the thing begins, and surely you can't ignore the significance of the way it ends - - it all depends.

But I'll tell you why I ask the question. It was my immediate reaction as I have read on more than one occasion the passage of Scripture which serves as the basis for today's sermon, another of the miracles that we're studying in the life of our Blessed Lord. In my earlier years I was very, very uncomfortable with this passage of Scripture. It was so unlike Jesus Christ -- it never quite measured up to my conception of a man who went around doing good, offering to do good, even sometimes before anybody asked that it might be done, and who proved himself on every occasion what I might say a perfect gentleman. But now you listen to the way I read this passage of Scripture -- keep in mind now this foolish question: Which is more important, the way a story begins, or the way it ends?

In the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew -- no other passage of Scripture is quite like this one, if for no other reason, this is the first time, and only time, that Jesus ever went beyond Palestine, He was in foreign territory, pagan territory.....

"Then Jesus went thence and departed to the coast of Tyre and Sidon, and behold, a woman of Canaan . . ."
(that means she was not Jewish)
" . . . came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David, my

daughter is grievously vexed with a devil . . . "

(now get ready)

" . . . He answered her not a word . . . "

-- so unlike Jesus

" . . . and his disciples came and besought him,
saying, send her away, she cries after us.

But he answered and said . . . "

(so unlike Jesus!)

I am not sent except to the lost sheep of the
house of Israel.

And then she came and worshipped him and said,
Lord, help me. But he answered her . . . "

(so unlike Jesus!)

" . . . It's not meet to take the children's bread
and to cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth,
Lord, yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall
from their master's table . . . "

-- now this is the bottom line, this is the way it ends:

" . . . And then Jesus answered and said unto her,
O woman, great is your faith. Be it unto thee as
thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from
that very hour . . . "

The longer I live the more I am convinced that most of us forget something in our Christian experience. We make much of the fact that God is always the same -- exactly! His love is constant and unending. And then unfortunately we assume perhaps that all of us who are His children can be pretty much the same as far as our needs are concerned, and our recognition of those needs, and the way those needs can be satisfied. But that is not true. We who are part of the Family of God can be as different as natural children of a particular family can be different from one another, as anyone who lived in that small town in which I grew up could tell you, that not one of the six Shaheen youngsters was exactly as any other youngster.

Winifred and I have had two sons. Those of you who have been part of our life know full well how different David is from Jon -- how different Jon is from David. But now when I look back and reflect upon our relationship with those two boys, when I look back and reflect upon my mother's relationship with her six children, I marvel how, that time and time again she individualized her

compassion and her love. She suited herself to where we happened to have been, without ever having the benefit of child and adolescent psychology. God be praised, she never even knew, I think, that there was such a word as adolescence -- while we were passing through that difficult period, now that I look back with profound gratitude -- how she met each one of us at the level that we happened to be. And you and I need to remember that in our relationship with God. God is always individualizing His treatment of us.

As one who has been the shepherd and bishop of your souls for wellnigh a quarter of a century -- I know very well how some of you have reached different levels of maturity at different speeds, and I could quickly add -- with different degrees of intensity. We do not always come to God at the same level and characterized by the same situation. God have mercy upon the pastor who doesn't understand that!

Now having said that, this is what we need to keep in mind when we recognize the truth inherent in this passage of Scripture. She did not have the benefit of the Jewish scriptures.....she did not have the benefit of the synagogue....she did not have the benefit of all that had gone before Jesus Christ came. But she came to Jesus and she believed that He had something that she needed in behalf of her daughter. And Jesus gave her the silent treatment. What, now, will you make of it when God gives His children the silent treatment? It is one of the things that some of us can't quite take.

....I know parents who can tolerate almost anything in their relationship with their youngsters except the silent treatment

....I know spouses who find it extremely difficult to live day in and day out with someone who gives them the silent treatment.

Jesus Christ gave this woman the silent treatment -- He answered her not a word -- so unlike Jesus! And then it was the disciples who came with a measure of enthusiasm and said, "Do something for her! Send her on her way! " Their

motivation was not good, but at least they were not against having some good thing done. And then she comes back and says something about crumbs.....and then Jesus gives her another rough time.

Oh, I know, you and I both know how the story ends, what the bottom line is, but we must never forget in this whole business of living is that we live our lives in chapters. We don't live all of our life in one complete story at one time. We go from one chapter to another, which is just one way of saying we go from one level to another....we go from one stage to another, and each stage serves its purpose. And that's exactly what Jesus Christ was doing in regard to this woman. He knew exactly where she ought to end up, and He had to make absolutely certain that He brought her stage by stage to this level.

It's the bottom line that matters most in our relationship with God. But don't ever forget -- in the meantime -- we need to pass from one stage to another. It had to be established, you see, that she wasn't simply turning to Him because He happened to be a good chap who was traveling around the country, visiting in her neighborhood, who had a magic wand. God does not satisfy people who think of Him in terms of a magician.

It had been established very clearly, too, that her motivation was correct. She was not thinking of herself -- she was thinking of the need of her daughter. This is where you and I sometimes find a disappointing experience with God. Our motivation can't always stand up to the acid test. If I understand God aright, He's not about to squander His magnificence on people who have ulterior motives. Her faith was rewarded because she stood up to the test constantly: "It's my daughter -- " The thing that God looks for in us is that we might be a channel for His love. He looks for us as instruments in His hand by which His purposes can be accomplished. This we need to remember.

You know how the story began . . . it's remembered because of the way it ended. But it might never have ended if the beginning had not gone so completely

from one stage to another. Incidentally - - - where are you in the story of your life in relationship with God? At what chapter could you be found?

....may you not bog down at any particular chapter,
but take each stage as a level from which to reach to a
higher level.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"PROTOTYPE OF THE CHRISTIAN HOME"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Luke 2: 51-52

This second Sunday in May is increasingly observed as the Festival of the Christian Home. It's in that manner, in that mood, in that spirit that I come now to the sacred desk. There is only one passage of Scripture that has the firmest of all grips upon my soul in this particular moment -- two verses from the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Reference is being made to the prototype for the Christian home, that home in Nazareth:

"And Jesus returned to Nazareth and was subject unto them; and Mary pondered and kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

You need to get it in proper perspective, of course you do -- the young teenager Jesus had just expressed a measure of independence. The rest of the family had gone on. He stayed behind in Jerusalem, He must have been absolutely thrilled to be there, talking with the learned ones, discussing, as He Himself said, the Father's business. But then Mary and Joseph, having found Him, took Him back to His home in Nazareth. And the Scriptures need to be read properly and correctly - - " . . and he was subject to them . . . "

....which is simply to say, He had to respect the authority of the home. Gifted as He was, He was still the child of Mary and Joseph -- according to God's plan.

One goes on quickly to read the concluding verses of that section. Having been there in Nazareth, the writer recalls what happens in the time that He spent with Mary and Joseph. It is a classic expression: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." You want a free translation? -- it simply means He grew up exactly as He should have grown up. He became a teenager,

He became an adolescent....and then finally He emerged into adulthood.

You have a right to hear my confession this morning -- I wish now it were 8:30. I missed a golden opportunity this morning at 8:30, honestly I did. We had between 20 - 25 - 30 - 40 youngsters perhaps, teenagers. Had I to do it all over again, I would have begun this very same sermon by looking them straight in the eye and saying, "Jesus was once your age -- you are now the age at which Jesus was once upon a time. Jesus did not drop down fully fashioned from Heaven. He came into the world as a baby, and grew up, matured, developed within the environment of the climate of a home and in a family circle." I would like very much to have rung the bell in their minds at least: Jesus Christ, the Teenager.

But now having said that, I am in duty bound to say to you: how did it happen that He grew up, and grew up so well? Again, let me say in the jargon of the day, the text means: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man" -- the text simply means that at an early age Jesus had it all together. He was, even as a teenager, a fully integrated personality. And that's exactly what God had in mind. To use a good Biblical expression, when He put the solidarity in families -- this now is the end result, that within the climate and within the environment of the family circle, a child should grow into adulthood -- fully orb'd, rounded out, if you please, comfortable with himself, comfortable with other people . . . and would you believe it, comfortable with God! All of that happened because of the prototype for the Christian home, that home in Nazareth.

Let me read for you what I read the other day....."From this point of view the family is an amazing instrument for the development of human personality and character. In it the infant gets the kind of care that makes it possible for him to survive . . . but physical survival is not all. We believe that God has for every person a purpose far beyond mere survival. All that we mean by character and mind and spirit, purpose and destiny, hope and fulfillment, **love** and sac-

crificing love, the family is the place. The family is the place where

rifice, honor and heroism, is involved. These are developed first, or thwarted, in the family. I would hasten to add that no nation can rise above the quality of its family life."

When this issue of Saint Luke MESSENGER first came to the church office some of us were distressed because we said -- What! Another printer's error? For on the front page, instead of reading that this Sunday will be observed as The Festival of The Christian Home, the printer had it: "The Festival of The Christian Hope." Our first inclination was to send it back and have the job done as it ought to have been done....but then it occurred to us that we would capitalize upon the mistake. For the Christian hope depends upon the Christian Home.

Now let me say it to you again -- "No nation can rise above the quality of its family life." This statement in an age when it is very easy to become mesmerized with the large issues of the hour needs to be pondered. The family must come first. The family, after all, remains the world's chief nursery of character, deeply influencing every living personality. The family regularizes and keeps wholesome the sexual life of the human race -- the family, to a greater degree than is often realized, gives us a base for political stability. In other words, the fate of the family goes far toward determining the fate of an era.

Are you aware of the fact that even the Soviets tried for a while to have done with the family unit? They introduced other corporate social techniques and strategies for influencing human behavior. They have now come back to recognizing the essential nature of the family.

There was that home in Nazareth, the prototype of the Christian home. What was it like? Whenever I have gone to Nazareth, as has been true for some of you, I have looked for the kind of a home in which I think Jesus might have grown up. You can easily find that kind of home even today -- a very simple home, a one-room dwelling, if you don't mind -- one room, did you get that! -- in which Joseph

and Mary brought up their five or six youngsters, as the case may have been -- one room, made out of that ever-abundant limestone....a flat roof, timbers running back and forth....and then the thatch and the mud.....there was a stairway running up the side of the house to the roof, where they could seek comfort, the cool breezes, the night or the day.....

inside -- no running water, no fireplace, no central heating, not electricity -- of course you know all of that! What did they have? Bare walls. Bare floor. A table, maybe a chair...maybe. An open fire. No pantry where food was stored -- they went pretty much from day to day, and I must tell you that whatever meal you're going to have today will be far more sumptuous than any meal that Jesus ever ate in His entire life-time in that home in Nazareth....

...seldom if ever did they have the kind of meat that you and I think of -- dried fish, occasionally, maybe that was His staple diet.....and when His mother wanted to bake bread she went to the place where she stored the grain and then went out in front of the house and ground it into that very coarse flour, made those flat loaves that must have tasted so good.....olives, cheese, goat's milk, dried figs, dates. That was about it. I wonder if He even had a change of wardrobe. The next time you go to your wardrobe, trying to figure out just which outfit you're going to wear that day -- how you're going to plan your color coordination out of so great a variety....think of Jesus Christ. I dare say the only clothing He owned was the clothing He wore. That's what I can tell you about that home in Nazareth -- all the things they didn't have, of which we have so much.

I can tell you that in that home, however, they had a great deal of love, and respect for one another. It was a God-fearing home. Mary loved Joseph -- no reason in the world to believe anything to the contrary! And

Joseph loved Mary. I think they must have been very different in their make-up. I don't think it was a perfect marriage. I'm going to make bold to say to you, I don't think there is any such thing as a perfect marriage -- and don't you rush home now to tell Winifred what I've said! -- because I know exactly her reply - - she'll say, "You're telling me!"

How can there be a perfect marriage when marriage is made up of two people who are not perfect? None of us is perfect! But we learn to compensate for one another. And that's why, when marriages are made in Heaven -- and some of us believe that -- God allows for the differences that can eventually become our strengths. For love, if it has any meaning at all, love is this: we meet the need of another person -- in/strength or in his weakness.

I remember that day in June when this lovely woman who read the Lessons for today stood within the shadow of this altar with that man alongside of her, and I had the good fortune to officiate at their wedding. And I remember what I said, among other things, from my vantage-point of having been married and observing the human scene: "There may be days when one of you will be weak.... there may be days when one of you will be strong. But you'll never have a day when you won't need each other."

And that is true for all of us. To love is to meet the need in the life of another person. People are not perfect. That's why we have our needs. People are unlike one another, in personality and temperament. I read every now and then, to my great satisfaction, about a Quaker gal who reflected upon the marriage of her parents. She said, "They were as different as day is from night. I would never have believed that God would ever have allowed those two people to be united. They were that different. Mother loved the opera -- Dad detested it. Mother was methodical -- everything had to be done in the right way at the right time -- no loose ends.....Dad couldn't care less, al-

ways hanging loose. But they respected each other. They learned to live with each other on the basis of their differences....so us kids -- off to the opera we went with Mother...then to the stream and frolicking through the fields we went with Dad. And when we grew up, some of us discovered that even when we'd try to be methodical and it didn't quite work out, we knew what it was to be flexible, and to bend when we had to bend. . . . "

Who knows but what it was that way in that home in Nazareth. Mary and Joseph compensating for each other, and always that basic integrity of two people coming to the surface. You could allow for any measure of difference as long as there is integrity in the relationship.

And in that home there was authority. The Scripture says: "Jesus went down and was subject to them." It was a home where there was discipline. It was a home where love was shared within all the human limitations, so well that when Jesus was dying on the cross, with the last strength that He could muster, He looked down and thought of His mother. The last measure of strength that He had He exercised in behalf of a continuing concern for His mother. Somewhere He learned that kind of love. Remember it and remember it well: Jesus Christ did not drop down fully fashioned from Heaven. Even the Scriptures say: He grew - - He matured - - He went from one level to another. And when they would come to Jesus and ask Him to tell them about God, what was the figure of speech that He cherished? He said: God is father-like. What a magnificent tribute to be paid to Joseph. Nothing in the make-up of Jesus would keep Him from thinking of God as being father-like.

I had a dream. And in that dream I hear the archangel coming to God and saying, "God, the world is going to Hell, and what do you intend to do about it?" And God says, "I intend to do a great deal about it. I'm going to go to the world in the form of a baby."

And the archangel says, "But a baby is a tender, fragile thing! Isn't

it a great risk?"

And God says, "I will choose me a Mary, and a Joseph, and I will entrust that child into their keeping. Within the climate and the environment they will provide that child will grow and mature . . . "

And that's the way it happened. Jesus did come, in human form. There was a home in Nazareth where He grew up in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.

I had a dream last night.....and I hear the archangel saying to God, "It's so different now. I'm not so sure you can find a Mary....I'm not so sure you can find a Joseph." . . . and God smiled as only God can smile, and says: "They're there." And every time a baby is born into the world you and I have reason to believe that God's trying it all over again. He has no other way by which to nurture His disciples than within the family circle.

Harry and Barbara, we're grateful to you for giving us vivid evidence today of how God says, "It's always happening -- every time a child is born, I'm willing to make the investment."

...and He counts on you and me to return the dividends He so richly deserves.

Now that's something to think about

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

Sermon -- Pastor David R. Shaheen
40th Anniversary of the Ordination
of Pastor Raymond Shaheen

May 18, 1960

" - - SO NATURALLY . . . "

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The sermon today is entitled "So Naturally - - " and it's based upon the first two words taken from a paragraph of a letter written by an Apostle named Paul to certain Christians who lived in a town called Colossae. You'll recognize the text, the 28th verse of that first chapter, when Paul wrote:

"So naturally we proclaim Christ! We warn everyone we meet, and we teach everyone we can, all that we know about him, so that we may bring every man up to his full maturity in Christ. This is what I am working and struggling at, with all the strength that God puts into me."

With the Apostle Paul trying to put in a sentence or two, as he laid bare his soul to the people to whom he wrote, that to preach and to teach Christ, there could be no greater privilege or task for a servant of the Lord.
... " So naturally " ... the implication, of course, - - your nature, your temperament, your mood, your character, your personality - - - so naturally.

I have not come to this pulpit to sing the praise of one man, special as this may be in the life of the Senior Pastor -- for it's not my intention to preach this sermon about a person who is my father, my teacher, or my confessor. But I have come to this pulpit to preach a sermon that reflects the thoughts about the nature of an individual who has been my pastor all of my life.

And yet as I think of him who has been my shepherd since birth, what I share with you on this day that marks the 40th anniversary of his Ordination is a collection of thoughts about the nature of the pastoral ministry -- what it means to be called by God. So let me remind you that in the ancient Order of

of the Scottish Church, the form of the congregational call went something like this:

"We do hereby invite, call and entreat you

(that is, the one who was called
to be the pastor of the congregation)

to undertake the Office of Pastor among us,
and the charge of our souls."

This is the task to which the minister was called, and summoned, and those were the terms on which the office was put in his hands. So if he let his work go unattended, he was considered something worse than a lazy preacher -- he was also considered one who could not keep a promise, and a dishonorable pledge-breaker. It was to be clearly understood that the shepherd was not free to recline and wait to be summoned, but rather in the background of the true preacher mind there should always be the image of one who would not need to be sought, but the one who came himself seeking.

Having grown up in a parsonage, and now living in one myself. I can tell you that being a pastor puts you at the crossroads of life. The phone rings -- on the other end a plea for help, a request for comfort....often being summoned to the bedside, sometimes with joy where there's a newborn child....sometimes with sorrow because there has been a death of a loved one. There is no calling which in its performance presents such compulsion to practice godliness. It's a great privilege to have a life filled with such rich experiences, and yet caution must be exercised that what is experienced is not lost. For one who preaches God's Word and is not himself comforted, one who preaches God's Word and is himself not strengthened, rebuked and humbled -- it's like a man who sits by a spring and goes thirsty....like a person holding a piece of bread in his hand, and going hungry.

One just doesn't go through the motions mechanically. The nature of the ministry requires that feeling be a pre-requisite if they are going to undertake seriously the personification of God's compassion for human life. The great Danish philosopher Kierkegaard once wrote about what it means to be a pastor, and he said the essential thing in your daily life is not the sermons that you preach; the life of the pastor must be the prologue of the sermon, and the commentary on what he teaches. The preacher is not to be the one who teaches for an hour on Sunday, but he teaches by deeds -- for whole weeks, for months, for years, his whole life long.

With the sainted Church Father Jerome, who said that a minister of Christ should have his tongue, his heart and his hand agree . . . "So naturally we proclaim Christ -- we warn and teach everyone we can -- so naturally." -- the nature of the ministry, the kind of thing that you have come to know in the one who has been the Pastor and the Shepherd of this parish over the years.

If there is anything that I would speak to him personally today, it would be to echo the words of Adam Brunet (?) who gives to every pastor something to ponder when he wrote that "The one need of your life, if you would serve God nobly, if through you the King of Glory is to find His way to the people of His love, is your need of God. His faith in you, when He puts a congregation under your care, you will honor only by complete self-dedication to Him. Who your people will be at the beginning you cannot know, but you will know this about them: that they will need God above all things and that God will need in you a consecrated man in order to reach them. Is there anything more solemn than to think how much depends on you for access to them? What can you do but by consecration give them the right-of-way through your life, that no self-born thing in you may hinder Him and His redeeming grace may have recourse."

Wrote a father to his son, in his very first parish: "I beg you, do not look upon it as a stepping-stone, but rather say, here I shall stay as long as it pleases God....if it be His will, until I die. Look upon every child, your

confirmands and every member of your congregation as if you will have to give account for every soul in the Day of the Lord. Every day commit all these human souls, from the worst and weakest of hands, namely your own, into the best and strongest of Hands. Then you will be able to carry out your ministry."

It comes quickly to mind on this day -- the Senior Pastor of this parish over the years has been the shepherd of only two congregations, and during those forty years almost twenty-five have been spent in this place. Come next January he will mark that 25th anniversary as the Pastor of this parish. I have walked the aisle of this place with him on many occasions -- I have crossed the threshold to some of your homes with him...morning, mid-day, and late at night. I know how he feels about the people he's been privileged to serve. Without any hesitation, I give testimony to his compassion and commitment to Christ's Church. He has walked the road of life with me in all kinds of situations. What John Watson once wrote about his pastor perhaps says it better than anything else that could be said about the life of a pastor as you and I have come to know it:

" . . . One's heart goes back from this eager, restless and ambitious age to the former days and recalls with fond recollection the pastor of his youth, who had lived all of his ministry in one place, and was buried where he was ordained -- who had baptized a child and admitted her to the Sacrament... and married her and baptized her children -- who knew all the ins-and-outs of his people's character and carried family history for generations in his head . . . who was ever thinking of his people, watching over them, visiting their homes, until his familiar figure on the street linked together the past and the present and Heaven and earth -- and opened a treasure-house of sacred memories. He prayed with the lad before he went away -- his mother could almost repeat the

words...he was constantly inquiring about his welfare, so binding him to his faith and home by silken tie. He was in the house on the day of his return -- to see how it had fared with him in the outer world. People turned to him as by instinct, and in their joys and sorrows . . .

...men consulted him in the crises of life, and as they lay a-dying, committed their wives and children into his care. He was a head to every widow, and a father to the orphans, and a friend of all the lonely, the discouraged, and the unsuccessful souls.

Ten miles away people did not know his name, but his own congregation regarded no other, and in the Lord's presence it was well known, it was often mentioned. When he laid down his trust and arrived on the other side, many whom he had fed, and guided, and restored, and comforted until he saw them through the Gates, were waiting to receive their shepherd-minister....
....and as they stood around before the Lord, he of all men could say without shame: 'Behold, Lord -- thine under-shepherd, and the flock that You gave me' . . .

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE MAN WITH THE BOOK"
Luke 4: 16-30

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

You are the 25th class that I have been privileged to confirm in Saint Luke Congregation. I am deeply mindful of this fact. And as I come to this sacred desk on this occasion I am constrained to read for you now this particular passage of Scripture:

"And he came to Nazareth where he had been brought up; and as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias, and when he had opened the book he found the place where it was written, The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. "

I should be less than honest if I did not tell you that I should like to be remembered by you as the Man-with-the-Book. For when I came into your life, I came with a Book in my hand -- the Holy Bible -- and all that I've tried to preach to you, and all that I've tried to teach you, I have drawn from the Good Book.

But more particularly I have come to remind you that when you think of Jesus Christ, you should think of Jesus Christ as the Man-with-the-Book. Once when He was your age, and a little bit younger, He found Himself among the learned ones, talking very easily with them. What was He talking about? Pre-

sumably what He had found in the Good Book.....

-- there was that great moment in His life when He had to do business with the Devil before He began His ministry. How did He handle the Devil? - - by what He had remembered from what He read in the Good Book - - He quoted Scripture again and again and again....

-- and you must remember, of course, that when He was hanging upon the cross, when Jesus Christ was breathing His last, those Seven Words which we continue to hear echo down the corridors of time -- there's a quotation of Scripture here and there.....

Jesus Christ was the Man-with-the-Book -- rooted and grounded in the Scriptures. I should like you to remember Him as the Man-with-the-Book.

I should like when you remember me, as the man-with-the-Book.

I should like the world to remember you as the person-with-the-Book. And that ought not to be difficult for you to understand because it was your class, the first class in the history of Saint Luke congregation, to have a person here and a person there who would suggest: "Pastor, can't we occasionally carry the Book in procession?" - - and we have been doing it now because you were thoughtful enough to make that indication possible. And that's right and proper that today, on the Day of your Confirmation, that one of those confirmed a few years before you, as she celebrates the confirmation of her sister, should be carrying the Book in procession.

Some years back we had a very wonderful person, a member of this congregation, who was asked the question: When fall-out shelters were in vogue, what would you do if you had to be confined in a fall-out shelter -- how would you spend your time?"

"Perish the thought," she said, "But if I had to be in a fall-out shelter

I would take with me something to read."

And the question naturally was put again: "And what would you take to read?"

And she said, "I would take with me three books. I would take with me a copy of the Bible....I would take with me a copy of the Service Book and Hymnal.....I would take with me a copy of Luther's Small Catechism."

So I would like to think that you would be remembered as the person-with-the-Book, because you have a high and holy regard for each one of these.

You have been nurtured in the Scriptures. It's no small thing that in the interviews that I had with you at Bethany, that I should put to you the pointed question: "What is your Confirmation Verse?" And then you may remember, I asked you why you chose that Confirmation Verse....and all for the very simple reason that as life continues to unfold for you, there will come a time, and mark my word for it, when you will be comforted and sustained by what you can remember from the Holy Bible. That's why we ask that you choose your Confirmation verses carefully, that out of all the verses in the Bible one in particular might be very precious to you.

You have been using the Service Book and Hymnal for all of your life. It's not only a handbook for worship, but it's a treasury of rich devotional material. Included of course are the great hymns of the Faith. It would be a happy thing if on occasion you could find yourself whistling or humming one of the great hymns that you'll find there. A person is known by the songs that he sings. And the Christian Faith has always been set to music.

You ought to hear me well when I tell you this, that someone spoke to me after the service this morning and said, "Pastor, I'm coming to the Confirmation Service today, and I remember what you told us when I was confirmed, that being a Christian is a joyful thing, a happy thing. Please -- I know what it has meant to me when you said that. If you can work it into what you have to say this

afternoon, won't you say it again?"

....I'm not so sure that I have to say it to you, because that very special committee of yours that's selected the banner theme -- you already chose that! -- this, your very own Confirmation Class Banner, resplendent in color before you, has the words: CELEBRATE NEW LIFE. Celebration is a joyful thing. When you turn to the hymns in the good book, many of them reflect the joy of, I might say, a somber truth, that you're numbered in the ranks of the redeemed, that there is set before you the hope of Heaven.

And you know very well the high value that we place upon Luther's Catechism. There may be some right now in this very place who look back and remember when they were first exposed to Luther's Catechism -- you remember how we talked about the five different parts of the Catechism. Maybe right now, if I were to catechetize them and ask them what they remember of the Catechism, some of them could recite it from memory -- all five parts. And you thought you had a formidable task when we only zeroed in on certain parts of it! May the say of memorization come back, for we need to be stabilized again and again by the things that, as we repeat them, hold us in good stead.

Helmut Golwitzer, a great European pastor, was once taken prisoner. The Communists put him in a camp, they denied him the opportunity of studying the Scriptures. He took with him a copy of the Holy Bible. He had to secret it in the ground at night, and then only in a very careful manner uncover it and read its pages and recite what he had read to somebody else. Once when he went to look for that Bible -- it wasn't there -- somebody had relocated it. He was panic-stricken. It was the thing that gave him stability in the days of his imprisonment.

If you were to ask me to number some of the great moments in my life, I would recite for you how once after World War II I heard Martin Niemoller speak, a man who had been a personal prisoner of Adolph Hitler for eight-and-a-half years. He was confined in solitary fashion, in a cell that was just about six

feet by eight feet. You know what he did? He had one chair in that cell. He would stand on it so that he could just get his chin above the solitary ledge in that cell, and to the prisoners who were either exercising down there below him or getting ready to face the firing squad, with his Bible in hand he would read to them some comforting verse from the Good Book.

May you be known as the person-with-the-book, even as Jesus Christ is remembered as the Person-With-The-Book. But above all else as you run your course through life, may you remember that you are meant to become a living epistle, that you may personify by your life the fact that God is, that God loves, and God has a concern for people.

I think I have to tell you this, it could well be that for some people you will be the only Bible that some people will ever read -- the only way that some people will ever know about God will be the way you love and care for other people. And that's a very awesome thought.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed
as recorded)

"COMMITTEE-OF-ONE"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The text is from the first Lesson that was read today. A question is being raised regarding the great event that we commemorate on this particular Sunday -- What does this mean?

That's the question that's been asked repeatedly concerning the visitation of the Holy Spirit. People have attempted to answer it. And here and there they've turned to one's vocabulary, using terms that are knowledgeable for us to explain an action of God. It is not easily done.

I have not come to this sacred desk this morning to attempt an explanation of what the Holy Spirit itself means. I know what it means to me. Like all precious things in life it has to be experienced and sometimes cannot be explained.

But having said that, I hasten to say to you, that whatever it means. it has no value whatever unless it can be applied personally. Religion is meaningless until it becomes local. As an example, take the greatest of all verses in the Scriptures, as sometimes we think of John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world . . . "

-- doesn't bring much comfort to some people, until they can hasten on with the remainder of the sentence:

" . . . that whosoever believes in Him should not
perish but have everlasting life."

It's only as I can begin to apply this wonderful truth to myself that the love of God has meaning -- only as I know that I am being loved am I made fit to love. Let it be said again and again -- only the loved can really love. We love Him because He first loved us.

Gilbert K. Chesterton said it correctly, of course he did, that religion has no meaning unless it becomes local. I would go one step farther -- the Christian faith has no meaning until it becomes personal. When you talk about the Spirit of God, remember how one day in Nazareth, when the Carpenter's-Son-Turned-Precacher returned, He quoted Isaiah -- and on that day He established His inaugural address, that's exactly what He did! -- and outlined the agenda for His life, looking upon Himself as a 'committee-of-one' appointed by God to make an impact upon life that none before Him had ever made....and none since. And when He began - - how did He begin? - - "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, and he hath anointed me, to do these things."

I know we talk about the Christian Church as being the company of believers..

-- I know we talk about this day as the Birthday of the

Christian Church....and I know we think about what happened

there in Jerusalem when the company of disciples were together....

But when you talk about that company upon whom the Holy Spirit came, you must always remember that that company was made up of individuals, who each in turn responded to what Jesus Christ had said. You ask me to give you a definition of the Church? - - I can simply say to you, the Church is made up of individuals who have responded to the Holy Spirit, and then the Holy Spirit binds them together - - only after each in turn has been visited by the Holy Spirit.

Don't allow yourself any kind of excuse by saying you don't understand what the Holy Spirit is, and then dismiss the whole subject. It is possible for you to experience the Holy Spirit individually, and as a person. And that's exactly what some of us are remembering today. When we look back across the years and remember how God became increasingly real to us, and we discover that there would be no meaning for our life apart from God, and within the company of believers who love Him, who praise Him and who serve Him.

The thrust of what I am trying to say to you in this brief sermon is this:

if you want to appreciate the meaning of the Holy Spirit, you can have no appreciation for it unless you first apply it to your own life.....

-- do not talk to me about the Holy Spirit in general.....

-- do not talk to me about the love of God in general.....

-- do not even talk to me about God's loving the world - - -

Talk to me about God's love for me as a person - - then I can begin to respond and help to funnel into this world a portion of His love that can be let loose as God intended it to be let loose -- through one individual after another. That's how God loves the world -- through people through whom His love can be channeled.....and wherever you are, you are meant to be an instrument of the love of God. Wherever you happen to be located -- you are meant to be God's local representative!

Let me conclude this sermon with a very unconventional illustration for a day such as this:

....there were three bake-shops, all located on the same street. Each had a sign over the main entrance of each shop.....

The one shop had as its sign these words:

WE BAKE THE FINEST DOUGHNUTS IN THE WORLD

The second bake-shop had this sign:

WE BAKE THE FINEST DOUGHNUTS IN THIS STATE

The third bake-shop had this sign:

WE BAKE THE FINEST DOUGHNUTS TO BE FOUND ON THIS STREET

Now where would you go to buy your doughnuts? No question about it!

And when I want an example of God's love, when I want an example of one whose life represents a free reign of the Holy Spirit, wouldn't it be a very gratifying thing if I wouldn't have to walk three feet away from this pulpit . . . !

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

- - ON THE HOLY TRINITY

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The sermon that you are about to hear is not the sermon that was planned to be preached on this day, but the closer I came to this Sunday which marks the Festival of the Holy Trinity, and the longer I spent time in going over the examination papers for this year's Confirmation Class, the more I was inclined to preach a sermon to you today on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

For there when I looked at those questions which the youngsters had answered, the one that most of them failed, or did not treat adequately, was not the doctrine about sin.....was not the doctrine about the Person of Jesus Christ.....was not the listing of the Ten Commandments....was not the writing of Luther's Explanation of the Second Article of the Creed.....was not the answer as to how we are saved. But where they bogged down was on the doctrine of the Trinity.

I had mixed feelings because I remembered that's exactly the point at which I did my poorest in my Confirmation Class experience. And I dare say that if I were to walk the aisle now and interrogate some of you at random - - "Stand up, please, and in the presence of this company of people explain to us the doctrine of the Trinity" - - - I could predict the results.

Why is it? It's fundamental to the Church.

I have no regard at all for that bishop of the Episcopal Church who once wrote a book and said the Church ought to have done with the doctrine of the Trinity -- it's excess baggage, it just gets in the way of people. We would be a lot better off if we simply said: "I believe in God." -- period.

Well now, bear with me, I want to be as helpful as I can, because this church clings tenaciously to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. We are Trinitarian in our appreciation for the God-head. Now don't let such language trouble you, let me help you as best I can.

First let me tell you that I recall quite frequently the time when I went to that wonderful Kingdom called Nepal and stood there in the shadow of the Himalayan Mountains, and at the base of a Buddhist shrine -- it's circular in design, had a dome at the top, of course, - - and as I walked around at the base, there was one prayer wheel after another which I could twirl, and my prayers would automatically go to Heaven.

....at the top of the dome were the
seven eyes -- presumably the good Buddhist understanding that
there was a god, a supreme being, who was watching everything that
he was doing.....

But upon reflection I said to myself, what good does it do? If a person can't appreciate the basic nature and character of a god, what good does it do me to know that he sees what I am doing if I don't know what he thinks, and what he feels about me as a person? -- and the world in which I happen to live? To have any appreciation for God, we need to know something of His basic nature and character.

Would you be willing to accept this premise -- let me try it for size:

A person is as a person does.

- - as an example, if I met you for the first time and we were alone in a room, you were seated in front of me and you remained immobile, no motion whatsoever . . . I'm not so sure that I'd have any idea as to the kind of person you really are! I could walk away with some impression of your personal appearance, but only as you began to speak -- which is a form of action, of course -- only as you might get up and do something -- even as you might

touch another person -- even as you might re-arrange a picture on a wall, or straighten it out . . . would I get some idea as to the kind of person you are.

A person is as a person does.

And I should also say very quickly -- a person is as the totality of his actions! Let me get the whole picture of his interest and activity, not just one thing that he's done.

I apply that very simple yardstick to God! I can better appreciate all that God is when I have some measure of understanding as to what He's been up to, as to what it is that He does. Bear with me now -- if you simply say you believe in God, period -- you can't short-change God because you are not allowing yourself enough time to get the full impact of the totality of His activity. As an example, some people who say they believe in God close the door at Creation -- that's their only great interest, and as far as they're concerned, when God made the world He called it a day's work, closed shop, and that was it. It's the hardest thing in the world for some people to believe that God has a continuing interest and concern for His world.

There are some people who think of God as a watchmaker, who designs the watch, fabricates it, puts it together, winds it up, gets it started, puts it on the shelf.....and walks away, no longer has any interest in his work. Let me say to you quite parenthetically, the difficulty for any number of people is, not whether there is a God or not -- but the problem of problems is, what is this God like?

I find myself invariably when I am introduced to people, or somebody mentions a particular person to me -- I ask two questions:

What's he like? . . . and very quickly I ask:

What does he do? -- and that in terms, of course, of ethical behavior as well.

We need today especially to march so quickly on beyond Creation, to emphasize

the fact that God has not abdicated His world, a world which on occasion seems to be inching toward Hell, is still a world that bears God's stamp -- a world against which God has never turned His back. And when you and I go from one segment of thought regarding God to another, we pass quickly from Creation to Redemption -- for God who made the world continues to be interested in His world to the extent that He himself has come in person. That's why we need to keep saying again and again: "Father -- Son -- and -- Holy Spirit." This is the visited planet, this is the world that's been invaded by God-in-Person -- this is the world on which God has left His indelible stamp. It's never enough just to say God made the world. The God who made the world is the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has a fatherly interest in us, who has a providential concern . . . a God who is love.

But don't talk to me of love as far as words alone are concerned! The beloved always is in duty bound to say, "But show me how you love me! I will believe that you love me when you demonstrate it." It's never enough just to say God is love.....but every time you and I say: Father - Son -- we think in terms of the sacrifice that the Father did when He gave us His Son to be, to use perfectly good language, "the propitiation of all our sins."

Father - Son - Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, as simply as I can for you, is God at work in the world today, making an impact upon us with all that He's already done! -- enabling us to understand what He has done. Martin Luther is absolutely right, you and I could not even understand what God is if God Himself wouldn't help us to understand. You and I could not be doing His work today -- it was not enough that He should commission us, but He also says, "I will be with you to comfort you, to enable you -- the Enlightener, the Stabilizer, the One who will gather you together and inspire you. No man ever does God's work on his own . . . no one can ever think God's thoughts by himself.

I was thrilled when I said to the youngsters, "Tell me about the Holy Spirit." They came up with what I would call a perfectly good answer: "God in the present

tense" . . . "God at work in the world today." Now every time you say: Father - Son - and Holy Spirit, you remind yourself of the totality of all that God's up to. He is not three gods - - He is one God come to us in different ways -- the same God, but doing different things, so that the same purpose could be served.

I want to be as helpful as possible, and perhaps this might be of some value. Standing at the sacred desk now you see one person, your Pastor. But I, who am your Pastor, am also a father...a son...a brother....a grandfather -- I have all of these different relations-ips, and I would like to think that every single one of those relationships, through the totality of their experiences, can be brought to bear in my relationship to you as a Pastor.

We make much here in Saint Luke Church of the terminology of "The Family in God" because I know what my own family has come to mean to me, and the family from which I came. I don't know that I could ever have asked you to think in those terms if I had not had that kind of a relationship. I reflect and think, sometimes I allow myself to believe that my most effective work in catechetical instruction happened only after I had one of our own boys in Confirmation Class. It introduces an entirely different dimension, and a different relationship -- and yet all the time I'm only one person -- not five different persons, but one person with different relationships, doing different things at different times -- but one integrated person.

Father - Son - and - Holy Spirit. A person is as a person does. God is as God does.

Would you allow this very simple illustration. Leslie Weatherhead tells in one of his writings how he once went to a church in Manchester. He was much impressed with the liturgy, he was much impressed with the way the Holy Communion was offered and shared. But he said the thing that meant most to him, as far as that particular experience was concerned, was when a child, for some unexplainable reason, got up from the seat where he happened to have been, and wandered down the aisle of the cathedral.....and the farther he got away from where he

had been, the more bewildered and confused he became. And then he said he noticed how an older person got up from where he had been and very slowly and softly, as though you could see the personification of tenderness and compassion, walked to where the child was -- could have been his grandfather -- lifted him up in his arms, held him securely, took him back to where he had been...sat him down alongside of him and put his arm around him.....

....said Leslie Weatherhead, "Once I saw what that person did, I had perfectly good and beautiful thoughts about him, and I began to feel wonderful inside....."

In a world that's stained by sin, in a world that's heading toward Hell, it's a very gratifying thing to be comforted in the knowledge that God is Father - Son - Holy Spirit.....and all that He is is making His impact upon my fragile soul, and yours as well.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE"
(Mark 9: 14-29)

O GOD, We make so little time to do
this sort of thing, to give some measure
of undivided attention to the interpreta-
tion of Your Word. Grant now that by
Your Holy Spirit we may make the most of
the time that we now give to this.
Through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord,
Who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

Today's sermon is another in the concluding section on the general theme
on the Miracles of Our Blessed Lord. Today's sermon is based upon a passage
of Scripture which is also found in Matthew and Luke. The text is from the
9th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark:

" But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted
him up; and he arose.
And when he was come into the house, his
disciples asked him privately, Why could not
we cast him out?
And he said unto them, This kind can come
forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting."

To all intents and purposes, it was a Monday morning quarterback session.
What went wrong? Who's to blame? Why couldn't we have pulled it off?

-- really, that must have been the tenor of the conversation....and
the people who had gathered -- a bunch of embarrassed disciples, humiliated.
You've got to see it in that perspective.

Now the upshot was this: Our Blessed Lord had just come from the Mount of
Transfiguration, a glorious prayer meeting session. And when He came down from
that experience He was confronted by a pushing jostling crowd. And as you might
know, our Blessed Lord said, "What goes on here?" - - He was always concerned
when there was unrest - - - "What goes on?" -- I dare say He asked.

One man spoke -- immediately -- and this is about what he said:

"My son is an epileptic. I heard about your wonderful

power, I've heard that you've given it to your disciples.
I took advantage of the fact that some of your disciples
were here. I brought my son. I asked that he be healed.
They couldn't do it!"

And then something happened that may surprise you. It's so seldom that you think of Jesus Christ as becoming infuriated....it's so seldom that you think of Jesus Christ as becoming impatient. But in very blunt language He immediately retorts, taking His disciples to task:

"How long do I have to be with you?

-- How long do I have to put up with you?

-- You're a faithless bunch."

....and then He said, with all the tenderness that His soul could command, "Bring your boy to me." And having asked the father how long he had been that way, and the father said, "Why, he's been this way since he was born . . ." and all the while he was talking the boy was foaming at the mouth, rolling back and forth in seemingly uncontrollable fashion...his eyes being rolled backward -- if you've ever been at hand when someone has been overcome by a seizure you can picture that very easily.....and then what did Jesus do? He performed a miracle: The boy became as he was meant to be, in full control of himself. a normal human being.

Now, when it's all over, the embarrassed humiliated disciples talk privately to Jesus and ask the question that had to be asked: Why couldn't we have done it? And then Jesus gave His very simple honest answer: "This kind of thing happens as a result of prayer."

I suppose I could tell you that there are three episodes here that cannot be ignored. The first episode I have **not** quite referred to in the course of this sermon thus far. The first one is this: there was a time, not too long before this event, when Jesus called His disciples together and gave them to understand

that everything that He was able to do He was going to allow them to do. They had been with Him now for weeks and months that had passed into a couple of years....they had seen how the lame could walk at His touch - - they had seen how the blind could see as He spoke the word....they may have even seen how the dead were brought back to life. Now, He says, this kind of power is going to be entrusted to you!

- - in fact there was a moment in the life of our Blessed Lord when He even went so far as to say, "You'll even be able to do greater things than I have done!"
...they must have been fully aware of this time when He told them of these things.

The second episode -- all of this needs to be seen in proper context -- He had taken two, three of His disciples particularly chosen, Peter, James and John, to the mountain-top. It was a great experience of Transfiguration -- it was like being exposed to the rapture -- it was as though the very doors of Heaven had opened. It was a perfectly glorious prayer session -- that's exactly what it was. And Peter, James and John reacted as I think you would have reacted -- as I hope you would have reacted - - - it was so wonderful that you couldn't think of it not going on. And Peter and James and John said, "If I could only stay here forever!"

Which leads me to remind you, are you aware of the fact that President John Kennedy, before he was assassinated, not many days before he was assassinated, on a perfectly beautiful fall day, had gone to Arlington Cemetery. And he stood there by the Lee-Custis mansion and he looked out over the country-side, out over Arlington, out over this panorama of this nation's capital that had come to mean so much to him, particularly in his position of responsibility...and the day was so beautiful and there was an ecstatic quality about it, and he is

supposed to have said -- it's a matter of historical record: "One could stay here forever."

....we have all had our moments like that, when we get a taste of something so absolutely beautiful and wonderful that we dread to think that it can't go on and on and on.

Well, Jesus had had that kind of an experience with His disciples and that's the way they reacted. But even God gives us to understand that life was not meant to be one perpetual prayer period! I should like very much to believe that for some of you, who come with real spiritual sensitivity, that the hour that you spend within these hallowed walls constitutes a taste of Heaven. I would be less than faithful to my calling if I did not believe that such could be possible and that there are those of you who respond with so great sensitivity.

But even though that may be true, God says you can't stay here forever. The benediction will be pronounced, and to all intents and purposes, as far as the church is concerned, the benediction essentially constitutes: "Get on your way, now! Get out of here! Go out into the world, where there are needs that have to be met, people that have to be ministered to." A Christian was never intended to be a person who could live his life in isolation.

When I think of certain religious people that I have known I recall certain characters that I saw in India when I was there on special assignment. I think of that holy man, the first one to whom I was exposed, as he sat there on the bench in the railroad station in Madras -- absolutely immobile! -- in deep prayer and meditation. And my friend said to me, "He's a holy man." And I completely and immediately discredited the whole thing, because I saw no hand stretched forth to meet anyone's need. Don't misunderstand me, I place a high value upon the contemplative, and I place a high value upon those who are willing to give themselves to prayer again and again and again...but I

cannot appreciate those whose hands remain only folded in prayer. The hands that are meant to glorify God are also meant to be dirtied, and to have the strength go out of them, as they minister to people where they are. And so when our Blessed Lord said to His disciples, "We've got to go now, we can't stay here - - " . . . they no sooner came from the mountain-top down into the valley than there was the epileptic! And not only that, our Blessed Lord was confronted with a group of disciples where faith had gone out of them! They were absolutely ineffective, unable to do what Jesus Christ said they could do.

Let me read for you the way this sermon was intended to begin -- this was to have been the opening sentence:

....Let me put it as simply as I can at the very beginning of this sermon: some things just don't have to be the way they are . . . that is, they could be much better. And that is the tragic aspect of life that causes some of us no end of dismay.

I don't mind telling you as some people who have been members of this parish all the time that I have been privileged to be your Pastor -- you know how infuriated I become by people who so easily settle for mediocrity, for people who never rise to their full potential and have no inclination at all to become better. In the sight of God, things were never meant to be just as they are, they were always meant to become better! And the day when I can no longer say this to you, I shall no longer deserve to be your Pastor.

Any man who is given the responsibility to shepherd people must always encourage them to rise to their potential in the sight of God. And that's precisely the thing that infuriated Jesus Christ. The situation didn't have to be as it was! - - - a man who comes for help, and His disciples impotent! -- and ineffective. In the sight of God any situation is meant to be better than it is.

Jesus ends by saying to this Monday-morning's-quarterback-session when they asked: "Why couldn't we pull it off? -- why were we ineffective? -- what went

wrong?"

"This kind of thing happens only through prayer."

And what is prayer? Prayer is to be in constant relationship with God. It's not the kind of thing that you enjoy for fifteen minutes, and then you turn it off. To pray is to be in this continuing relationship with God. In the moment when our Blessed Lord commanded them to be able to do this sort of thing, they may have experienced a measure of rapture . . . in the time when they were on the Mountain of Transfiguration there was no question about it: there was ecstasy. But while we are human and we have our seasons of the spirit, the ebb and the flow, it is possible for one to be very near to the purposes of God, and to be able to tap the power of God miles away from this very altar in which you find yourselves right now. What had happened with His disciples? They had lost touch with God in the face of all the misery....they had forgotten that God says: "Everything is possible - - " They had forgotten that. They had gotten to the place where they no longer believed in the possible.

Do you mind my giving you a page out of my past . . . I was taken up by the way the brochure described it. In those days, you could make the handsome sum of \$40.00 a week by selling books. And as a teenager I was taken in by it. There were twin books: little devotional books, one called "God's Men" -- the other called "God's Message,"and I got all excited, my first experience in salesmanship. And I hitch-hiked fifteen miles away from my home town to go to another town where I thought it would be a little bit easier. And I remember knocking on the first door, and what do you suppose I said as I panicked -- "Lady, you don't want to buy a book today, do you?" -- and you know exactly her answer -- she said: "No." I try to remember that.

In my hospital calls during this past week I was ministered to, as is true so often, by the patient. She had had cancer. She had made up her mind that when she had cancer she was going to face it and to fight it. And she said,

"Pastor, it's paid off in my life, and do you know that I saw a television program some time ago that said for cancer patients, 40% of them recover, but it's based primarily on their attitude and their faith in God." These disciples had lost touch with the possibilities that God affords, and they were ineffective.

I covet for this congregation the art of the possible -- which leads to the miracle. Some of you are absolutely astounded when I bring to your attention every now and then the evidence of a wonderful thing that's happening, here in Saint Luke. Do I have to tell you, it happens on the part of people who believe that it can happen! . . . and then allow it to happen through them.

There;s a preacher on television who has a great following -- not because of the way he preaches, I don't classify him as a great preacher -- but I think his following is due to the fact that he says invariably: "Something wonderful is going to happen!"

....and the God who is the Father of our
Lord Jesus Christ is able to make it happen -- if
only you believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"WORTHY SON"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Luke 2: 51-52

This is a sermon for Fathers' Day, the text the closing verses of the 2nd chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

" . . and Jesus returned unto Nazareth and was
subject unto them; and Mary his mother pondered
and kept all these sayings in her heart.
And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature,
and in favor with God and man."

That last verse, of course, simply means Jesus grew up, exactly the way He was meant to grow up, very comfortable with Himself, with other people, and with God, a wholly integrated personality, if you please.

Now at the very beginning of this sermon let me suggest that you engage in an experience, an experiment, I ought to say -- there's something to be said for it -- a "suppose" experiment. Suppose one day somebody gave you this very unusual assignment: to write an epitaph for Jesus Christ.

Remove from your mind as quickly as you can the fact that He is your personal Saviour, that He is God come to us in human form. But from a human perspective, as a person who happened to have lived in a certain place at a certain time, who grew up and died, and now, from that perspective -- you write the epitaph.

It's a salutary thing to put yourself in that position sometimes, of becoming an epitaph-writer. For I dare say, not until you might assume that kind of responsibility might you be able to assess the true meaning of a person's life. What, now, is to be said for this person?

Oh, the writers of the Gospel record occasionally did it unwittingly -- as an example:

- - "He went around doing good . . . "

- "He was the friend of sinners . . . "

But that's not especially the kind of thing I have in mind. If Jesus were to have a tombstone -- let me try this one on you for size:

JESUS OF NAZARETH

WORTHY SON
OF A NOBLE FATHER

....for I can't possibly think of Jesus Christ aside from His relationship with Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth.

I know we make much of Mary along with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters -- as well we should -- no question about that. But we ought never to make much of Mary at the expense of Joseph. For I am willing to suggest to you that a very significant part -- who knows but what the most important part of Jesus' life was spent by the side of Joseph, His father. What kind of father do you suppose Joseph was?

We know very little about him, you know that. Every now and then we deal with some traditional aspect concerning him. But I have every reason to believe that he must have been a very wonderful person, God's chosen person, no less. So I deal with the text: "And Jesus went down to Nazareth and was subject unto them." That means in that home there was authority. Stemming myself from Middle Eastern stock, I have no difficulty at all to believe that Joseph was the head of the house, he was the authority figure. That's exactly the way it was in that day. And I am very happy in the thought that that's the way it was.

I have no trouble, on the other hand, with those of you in this enlightened age of ours who think in terms of joint authority. This doesn't trouble me a bit either. But what I'm pleading for is the recognition that authority is essential.

There are those who observe the human scene and say we suffer from the fact that there's not enough authority in the home, that there is not enough discipline. My years have taught me that anything without authority can become chaotic. My appreciation for Scriptures has led me to believe that God places a priority on

this sort of thing. How else do you read the Ten Commandments? -- when God gave us the Ten Commandments for our benefit, He begins by saying: "I am the Lord thy God, you shall have no other gods before Me." If that isn't being put bluntly and boldly as to who is the authority, I don't know what is. And interestingly enough, Alvin Rogness, that great soul of the American Lutheran Church, preacher, writer, theologian, administrator -- once wrote an interpretation of Luther's Catechism, and when he comes to that part of the Commandments that deals with "Honor thy father and thy mother" -- Alvin Rogness suggests that they be seen as God's vice-presidents, that they are the ones, the authority figure, who are under His authority and who represent to their children the authority of God. In that home in Nazareth Jesus went down and was subject unto them....no question about the fact that there was authority in that home. And authority exercised by the right of God.

I have no patience with people who want to be authoritative and who do not command respect. If I know anything at all about that man Joseph, he was the kind of person who commanded respect.

I envy those, I covet those who can take an idea and reduce it to canvas. If I were a painter I know how I again would want to **portray** Jesus Christ. I'd like to portray Him as a child -- a youngster, I dare say, walking down a dusty lane in Galilee by the side of Joseph, touching, clutching the hand of Joseph. I'd read much into that, of course I would -- trust...respect....love. I think Joseph was that kind of father. Eighteen years, mind you, assuming Joseph lived all of the years that Jesus was in Nazareth. There are those who say he died at an early age and Jesus took over the carpenter shop -- this I don't know. But all the while he was in Nazareth he worked in the carpenter shop.

Now how you characterize that period of time that Jesus spent with Joseph in the carpenter shop. Whatever you may say of it, I am going to suggest that you think of it in terms of a relationship, a one-to-one relationship, a father-and-a-son relationship. And when it's all said and done, that's the finest thing

that happens between us, the kind of relationship that we can assess when we think of certain people. It's what we receive because we know them, it's what we receive because we can be with them, it's what they impart to us, just by being with them.

I am absolutely convinced that many things that you and I get to experience in life we experience by osmosis, if you please, or just by being in the presence of somebody else. I don't remember my father ever taking me aside, as an example, and saying, "Now Raymond, you must be truthful!" -- he probably did, but I don't remember a teaching lesson as such....

...I don't remember my father ever taking me aside and saying, "Now Raymond, you must look upon the world with nothing less than the eyes of love!"

But I can say this to you, that when I thank God for the 'vice-presidents' that He gave me -- teachers, pastors, friends, relatives -- I first think of those who taught me more than anyone else, my father and my mother. I learned to be truthful because each of them in turn was truthful....what measure of love I can easily channel into your lives I first learned from my parents -- who loved people....

...what appreciation that I have for the quality and a measure of elegance, I first learned just by being with my father in particular -- how he loved quality, and how he loved an enhancing touch . . .

Did he ever give me a specific lesson in it? This he taught me in our relationship.

There are all kinds of people who came into that carpenter shop, I think there is no question about that. Some were good, some were bad, some were deadbeats -- some, no doubt, would try to get Joseph to be a bit shoddy in his workmanship, to come down on the price, to use inferior wood. All the while Jesus could observe him....and in and through that relationship he taught the things

that held Him in good stead when He went out to face the world.

From a human perspective, you've got to look at it this way: Jesus always accepted people where they happened to have been, not always where He thought they ought to be. And that's a great mark for any teacher, and for anyone who would save mankind! Presumably, Jesus learned that, one of the lessons He mastered, as He stood by the side of Joseph in the carpenter shop.

Francis of Assisi, they used to say, gathered together a band of disciples, and they kept saying to him, "Now, you have got to let us preach some day -- turn us loose and let us preach!" The day came. "Now," he says, "You can go preach." And they said to him, "But you haven't taught us! You haven't given us any lessons." And then supposedly he turned and said, "But you have been with me!" . . . which is only to suggest: "Haven't you observed me?" - - that's the way you learn!

I am numbered among those who look back with a degree of nostalgia for the days when there was such a thing as an apprenticeship, where almost anyone learned what he was going to do by being with someone else who had mastered the art, and the wonderful lessons that you learn just by being with somebody else.

As this sermon is concluded, I am in duty bound to remind you of a bit of legend that has to do with the ancient school of rabbis. The old rabbi in Israel knew a measure of delight in relating about the rabbi who had thrust into his family circle an orphan. How she happened to get there I can't tell you, but she came under their influence, and she benefited from their family circle. He, to all intents and purposes, was her guardian....

...the day came when according to Jewish tradition she was to be registered...so he takes this girl. The clerk says to her: "and your name? What is your name?" And she said, "My name is Rachel."

...the second question: "and where do you live?" And then

she gave her residence -- with the rabbi and his family.

....and then the third question: "Who is your father?" It was an embarrassing question, and there was an awkward moment.

She dropped her head and dropped her eyes....and there was a strange look in her eyes as she lifted her face to the rabbi and she said, "I'll have to give them your name -- for," said she, and said she wisely -- "not he who begets but he who brings a child up is the true father!"

Joseph was a true father -- so much so that one day when some people came to Jesus and said, "Lord, teach us to pray" -- He said, "When ye pray, say -- "

....not "Eternal Judge . . . "

....not "Mastermind of the Universe . . . "

....not "Supreme architect of the Universe . . . "

...fitting as any of those descriptives could have been.

But without any reservation whatsoever, and with all the beauty and the strength that His soul could command, He said, "When you pray, say "Father . . . "

Jesus Christ, if You were to have a tombstone --

Jesus Christ, if you were to have my epitaph, for the moment at least:

WORTHY SON

OF A NOBLE FATHER

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MIRACLES: "ON TAKING GOD AT HIS WORD"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

John 4:53-54

Today's sermon is the next-to-the-last in the general series on Miracles of our Blessed Lord. Today's sermon bears the title: "On Taking God at His Word" and the text is from the 4th chapter of the Gospel according to John, verses 53 and 54:

" . . So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house.

This is again the second miracle that Jesus did, when he was come out of Judea into Galilee."

Tell me, I think the question is worth asking: does faith precede, or follow, a miracle? Do miracles happen because people believe, or do people believe because they happen to have been around when the miracle was performed? Your answer, please.

Well, let me suggest a-Yes-and-a-No. Now that's not meant to be evasive, of course not. The Bible provides proof and evidence that it can be either way. Faith can be both reason and reward where miracles are concerned. Now this is something that we need to think about.

What comes first to your mind when a miracle is performed? -- the fact that God has done something exceedingly wonderful -- do you emphasize the thing that's been done.....or do you first think about the fact that God is wise enough, God is compassionate enough, and God is powerful enough to do the thing that's happened? - - - which is simply to suggest that far more important than the thing that's done is the relationship that we're meant to have with the God who's made it possible.

Let me give you a very simple home-spun illustration: I am the father of two boys -- they've now grown up to be full-grown adults. Across the years, when I look back in that impressionable period of their lives, there were times when they came to me that I might do something for them. They had a request, and each in turn would wait to see whether or not I would give or do what for the moment they wanted very, very much.

The years have passed very quickly. When the day comes that they'll look back and remember the father that they had, I would be very happy if they would not first think of me as the person who did certain things for them. I would be very happy if they would/^{not}first think of me as the person who did certain things for them. I would be very happy if they would first think of me as the kind of person with whom they had the kind of relationship that allowed them to come and ask for a favor.....and then once the favor had been granted or not been granted, they might see how that relationship with their father was strengthened just because their father happened to be the kind of person he was.

Why do I give you this very simple home-spun illustration? For the very simple reason that the most important thing that you and I must deal with when we think about God is our relationship with Him, the kind of God that He happens to be . . .

-- He is essentially wise....

-- He is essentially good....

-- He is essentially compassionate....

-- He is essentially powerful.....

....and if you and I walk away sometime, after some good thing has occurred in our lives, failing to appreciate the goodness of God, the compassion of God, the wisdom of God -- then to all degree and purposes the blessing that we have received will not blossom into its fullest value. I give this to you on good authority. Be patient with me now as I explain.

John records seven of the thirty miracles that Jesus performed. John was very, very selective, and of all the Gospel recorders John more than any other emphasizes the element of belief and faith. And when he talks about a miracle that Jesus did, it's because he wants us to recognize the importance of faith, this trust relationship, with Jesus Christ. The miracle that serves as the context for today's sermon took place when Jesus turned His back upon Judea and went to Galilee.

It was a year of popular favor in Jerusalem. People came to Him from every side. They were much impressed by what He said, even more impressed and excited by what He did. The reputation of a wonder-worker preceded Him wherever He went. I'm going to suggest to you that Jesus got rather tired of that kind of a reputation, having people following Him simply because they thought Him to be a worker of miracles. And for a respite, I dare say, He had headed for His native Galilee. And as He went, to Cana, there was a very fine person who heard about Him who lived in Capernaum. He'd come from Capernaum to Cana where Jesus is, and as he comes to Jesus he begins by telling Him that his son is dying. He asks Jesus to perform a miracle.

Jesus Christ responds at first blush with some degree of insensitivity, at least that would be from our perspective. For instead of saying, "I'm very happy to oblige you, my friend -- you've traveled some distance and I commend you for having this concern for somebody else -- you are to be congratulated that when you come into my presence you are not at all selfish, that you have a concern for your child. This is an exceedingly precious thing in God's sight!" . . . but Jesus did not speak to him like that. But almost sternly He said, "Unless you people see signs and wonders you're not going to believe, are you?" -- as much as to say, I'm rather tired of people who come to me only because of what they think I can do.

....nonetheless, the man in his desperation continues his plea. And then Jesus says to him: "Well then, go your way -- your boy is going to live."

The man presumably takes his time in going home, and even before he gets there the servants come and meet him on the way and say, "There's a turn for the better -- your boy is going to make it." And then the father did the kind of thing that you would do, he said, "When did this turn set in? -- when did you notice this improvement?" And when they answered, he said, "Why, that's exactly the same time that Jesus said to me it was going to happen." And the net result is, as the Scriptures have it, the man gave praise to God -- as the Scriptures say -- "He believed completely, and all of his household."

Now when you talk about faith, as far as this passage of Scripture is concerned, there are three different stages, and you and I need to recognize that. The first may be when we come to Jesus Christ out of desperation. We've tried everything else, why not give God a twirl? There are people like that.

At the very first service we conducted this morning, I greeted a woman who came here visiting Saint Luke Church for the very first time. I spent less than two minutes with her in conversation, and bless her soul, I met her at the point where she happens to be -- "I'm lonely, Pastor -- I'm a widow. I felt I ought to come to church. I've tried other things . . ." Well, there are people who begin at that point. After having tried everything else, let's give God a chance. We have reason to believe that that was the level of this man's faith...

....or it may have been out of curiosity -- "We've heard you've done this sort of thing for somebody else -- I'll give you a chance to do it for my boy . . ."

Whether it's branded curiosity or desperation, nonetheless there was enough faith by which to begin. Now that may be the first step.

The second stage in one's maturation in faith is where you're willing to accept what Jesus Christ says. You're not certain. Now keep that in mind. The father was not certain that his boy was going to live, but Jesus Christ said that he would! And the father took Jesus Christ at His word. That's the second exceedingly precious stage in faith, where you're willing to accept the word of

God. Let's let it be clearly understood, there are times when we do not know, and that's the time when we have to say we believe. And that's the second stage that a person has to reach.

Then the third stage? -- when one experiences it for himself. Now there's no uncertainty. The bottom line is there -- God does fulfill what He says He can do -- God does deliver -- God can make it happen! Now when that does occur, then our faith should blossom fully.

The trouble with many of us is, we want to skip the first two stages, or maybe we do, and we want everything to happen exactly the way it happens without having to pass through, human as we are, what may have to be preliminary stages.

Little known to some of you is the fact that within the past month we had a service of anointing in the Chapel of the Grateful Heart. Right out of Scripture, a parishioner came and said, "Pastor, I read in James that when the elders come together and pray with a member of the congregation, that a good and righteous thing can happen. Would you do this for me?" So on a Saturday morning, a handful of us gathered in the Chapel of the Grateful Heart -- we had prayer...we had confession...we had the Sacrament....and a brief period of anointing -- all clearly understood that this was Scriptural -- all clearly understood that while we did not know what God had in mind, we fervently believed that God's will is to be trusted. The person who was anointed was in church this morning, walking without any difficulty, and thanking God for what had happened.

At the conclusion of the service he came to me and he said, "I know exactly what you meant by that sermon, Pastor -- for the big thing is not the fact that a miracle may have taken place....the big thing is, I have come through trusting completely the wisdom and the power and the compassion of God!"

....and the salutary thing is, knowing him as I do, he would have come to the same conclusion if he were here in a wheelchair this morning....
....and that's something to think about.

* * * *

MIRACLES: "A VERY SPECIAL PERSON"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Matthew 8:5-13

When Winifred and I and our two boys lived at the parsonage at 9219 Manchester Road, we frequently had as our Sunday dinner guest a friend of the family. We used to say to her that her invitation to Sunday dinner was perpetually renewable -- she was the kind of a person that one thoroughly enjoyed having present. We used to refer to her, and with affection, of course, in a very simple way, as being "something else."

Now if you've ever been inclined to use that figure of speech, you'll know that I'm referring to a kind of person who is special, a kind of person, I presume, who is special because seemingly they just happen naturally to be all that they ought to be. Every now and then -- not too often -- you and I come across that kind of person -- a person who is just naturally all that a person ought to be -- naturally kind....naturally polite....naturally spiritually sensitive....naturally considerate of other people....naturally decent....naturally honest. Not very often, but every now and then, we come across a person who is "something else" -- as special as all that -- naturally good.

This introduction, of course, is being done deliberately because I want to talk to you about a man who was instrumental in a miracle being performed. He was not a person who went to church every Sunday, I have to tell you that, as much as I'm not too happy to have to make that claim to you. In fact, he was outside the faith, he wasn't even of the faith of Jesus Christ. But he seemed to have been naturally a child of God, who employed in his daily life the things that were pleasing to God . . .

-- he placed a high value upon people, he placed a high

value upon the recognition of God himself, even though
he did not have a Jewish understanding of the nature
and character of God - -

What he did know about God was that God was good, and that God was able to do
the thing that ought to be done in behalf of people who might be in need.

Now that's an exemplary thing to say about someone, even though you might
not be able to catalogue that person as far as a denomination is concerned,
even though that person might not be able to fit into a particular theological
mold - - - it's a salutary thing to say of a person: He was -- so it would seem,
naturally a child of God, who believed in the goodness of God, and the capability
of God to meet the need of another person.

Listen carefully now while I read from the Good Book, Today's English
Version, about that passage of Scripture which serves as the context for today's
sermon as I talk to you about someone special -- it's the 8th chapter of the
Gospel according to Matthew:

" . . . When Jesus entered Capernaum, a Roman officer
met him and begged for help: 'Sir, my servant is home,
sick in bed, unable to move, and suffering terribly.'
'I will go and make him well,' Jesus said. 'Oh no,
sir,' answered the officer. 'I do not deserve to have
you come into my house. Just give the order and my
servant will get well. I, too, am a man with superior
officers over me, and I have soldiers under me; so I
order this one, 'Go!' and he goes; and I order that
one, 'Come!' and he comes; and I order my slave, 'Do
this!' and he does it.' Jesus was surprised
(or astonished, or delighted)
when he heard this, and said to the people who were
following him: "I tell you, I have never seen such
faith, I have never seen such faith as this in any-
one in Israel . . . "

That's a perfectly wonderful thing to say about a person -- "You have faith,
and I haven't seen any faith quite like this before -- surely not where I
might have expected to see it!" . . . implies Jesus Christ.

Now I'm perfectly mindful of the fact that this is the concluding sermon
in a series on the general theme of Miracles. I don't know yet where some of

you are in your appreciation for miracles. Some of you may still find it difficult to believe that such things happen. I will do my best to understand that that could be your stance. But as far as I'm concerned, without any hesitation, without any reluctance whatsoever, let me serve notice on you if you don't understand it already -- I believe in miracles. I am completely committed to three things that I understand about the nature and character of God:

-- that He is powerful -- He is not impotent -- He
is a power over and above anything that you
and I might be able to know.

-- I believe in the second place in His wisdom

-- In the third place I believe in His compassion.

Because I believe in the greatness of God, in the wisdom of God and the compassion of God, I have no hesitation to accept the fact that when He sees fit -- according to our need -- He will meet that need in a way that you and I do not ordinarily understand.

Some of these miracles happen in nature. Some of these miracles, for the most part, happen among people. You can divide people into two categories: they either believe in miracles or they don't believe in miracles....

....you can still divide them into another set of
categories: they either don't much care that they
don't believe in miracles, or they wish that they could.

In this man who was "something else" I now bring to your attention the basic ingredients if a miracle should happen. He's Exhibit A in my book -- he's a superb example of what's essential. First, he came out of the sense of need, unashamedly so. He hadn't been able to swing with this thing himself up to this point. Whatever reserves and resources he had, they were absolutely inadequate, and he recognizes that in God there is a capability beyond his. You can begin at that point.

And the second thing that's as precious as any -- he came to Jesus Christ, not for himself, but he came because he was burdened by a regard for somebody else. Now you need to appreciate that to get it in proper focus.

The old King James translation refers to him as a centurion, and a centurion is an army officer who had charge of a hundred people -- he was a man with authority.

Any man who is an authority can better perform his work if he has a high regard for the people who serve under him. Any leader, I dare say, can almost work wonders, granted the people under him will respond to his motivation, and his encouragement, and the kind of example that leader sets in front of him. A good leader who is to be trusted and respected, granted he has the capability, can lead his people into marvelous fields of endeavor....and from a human perspective, with some degree of success.

I think the centurion was that kind of a person -- "I'm a man under authority -- I give orders, people obey them! And I follow orders -- I have people over me. I recognize the need for authority" . . . that's what this man is saying. But all the while, as this passage of Scripture deserves to be read repeatedly, you get the very wonderful impression that he had a high and holy regard for individuals. It comes to the surface magnificently in regard for the man who happened to have been ill. He was his own slave, his own personal servant, perhaps.

Now you can appreciate this all the more when I tell you that it is a matter of historical record: in those days a slave or a servant was just treated like an object: as long as it was productive and served a useful purpose you held on to it; but when it was no longer productive you got rid of it, you simply discarded it, like you and I might discard a worn-out piece of machinery that can't be repaired. But here was a man, even in that day, having a concern for

a human being who was not productive, who was deeply moved by the fact that he had a need that ought to be met . . .

-- I'm not so sure that slave, of course, was of his own persuasion, religiously speaking, if he had any religion at all

-- I have no reason to believe that he was the same cultural strain -- of course he wasn't!

-- I have reason to believe that if he wanted to, he could have treated that servant, that slave, with disdain, as so much chattel...

But the very salutary thing about this man is, he saw him with unprejudiced eyes, he saw him as a human being. And this is always precious in the sight of God. Wonderful things will always happen when we see one another as human beings.

Who is it who wrote these lines? --

"My friend and I had built a wall
Between us, thick and wide,
The stones of it are high with scorn,
The plaster thick with pride.
We talk across those stubborn stones,
So arrogantly tall,
Only we cannot touch our hands
Since we have built the wall."

Please, I'm coming down as heavily as I can. I can't tell you what this man believed or didn't believe about God, as far as being correct theologically is concerned. But I do know that he had a high regard for a human being.

I prize in my study here at the church one of the first paintings that our artist son Jon ever did. He wanted his father to have it especially, but I was particularly pleased that he would choose one of my favorite characters in history, St. Francis of Assisi, and Jon gave it his own particular interpretation. All this leads me to recall for you the words written by Gilbert K. Chesterton in his "Life of St. Francis" -- and I quote directly now:

"What gave him his extraordinary personal power was this:
that from the Pope to the beggar, from the Sultan of Syria

in his pavilion to the ragged robbers crawling out of the wood, there was never a man who looked into those brown burning eyes without being certain that Francis Bernardoni was really interested in him as an inner, individual life, a life that was destined from the cradle to the grave, and that he as a person was being valued and taken seriously."

The centurion had a high regard for a particular person as a person. The centurion believed that in this world there was a power that could be unleashed, let loose, to meet that need. I would not want to live another hour if I could not believe that in this world the power of God could be released to work for good.

The third thing that needs to be said is that all the while this man was telling Jesus Christ -- "I'm unworthy -- I don't deserve this kind of thing." Incidentally and quite parenthetically, let me hasten to say to you, maybe that's one reason why we haven't seen some miracles pulled off! -- because we have a way of strutting into the very presence of God -- can you imagine a person strutting into the presence of God? -- demanding God to give him some measure of undivided attention, saying, "I deserve now, God, that you should do this for me" -- that's the way some of us think, that's the way some of us talk. We have our moments when some untoward thing comes our way: "God! -- that this should happen to me!" As you read this account of the centurion you will be impressed by the fact: "Lord, I'm unworthy."

You need to hear me say it to you again, if you've heard it before, I believe in miracles. My first introduction to an appreciation for miracles came from what my father told me as he spoke to me about a woman that I never met -- his mother, my paternal grandmother. The episode, the incident, was just like a page out of the New Testament.....

His brother, my uncle whom I never met, was ill with a fever.

My grandmother lived in that little village up in the mountains

from Beirut, that magnificent city by the Mediterranean....
grievously ill, sick with a fever. My father told me how my
grandmother crawled on her hands and knees to the village church
and lit a candle, praying for her son who was sick....and by the
time she got home the fever had gone -- he was being restored to health. What
am I underlining when I tell you this? The fact that she crawled on her hands
and knees - - "I believe You can do it, God" she was saying, "but I don't de-
serve the blessing."

Miracles can happen, when we believe in the goodness and the greatness of
God, and when we admit that that should happen -- not because of our merit,
but because God happens to be the kind of a God that He is. So this sermon
series is being concluded.

I never cease to marvel at the possibility of wonderful things being able
to happen.....but the only miracle that God has pulled off by Himself -- and
I say that respectfully, was the miracle of creation. Ever since then, when
it comes time to have a miracle happen, He looks for unselfish people....

....He looks for humble people

....He looks for people who have a pure trust -- in His wisdom,
in His greatness, in His compassion.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"A NATION IN TROUBLE"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The sermon on this particular Sunday bears the title, carefully chosen,
"A Nation in Trouble," and the text is from the 127th Psalm:

"Except the Lord build the house,
they labor in vain who build it."

That title for the sermon, deliberately chosen, may allow you to think for the
moment that I am a pessimist. I am not; I am a brooding optimist.

On the other hand it could permit you to think that I am an alarmist; I am
not; I'd like to believe that I am a realist. Anyone who is at all sensitive
must come to the conclusion that all is not well with us as a nation. I shall not
detail for you this chapter and verse. Sufficient, however, for you to recall
from Bernard Shaw's play, "Dr. Knock" -- when one of the characters comes on the
stage and says: "If you say that you are well, it's only because you do not know
that you are sick."

Again and ever so often as one surveys the scene, there is evidence that we
are not well, that we are a sick society, that we are a nation in trouble. But
I hasten to say, and say it very quickly, it has always been that way. It's only
in retrospect, I suppose, when we allow ourselves to believe that some times have
been far better than others, only as we wax nostalgic, maybe, do we put a halo
or a glow on a chapter that was written centuries ago. But any student who reads
history may come to the conclusion that there has never been a time when we did
not face some kind of trouble.

It was that way at the very beginning -- July 4, 1776. Representatives of
the thirteen colonies gathered at the State House in Philadelphia. They were in

deep trouble. What, now, to do about the frustrating present moment?

Historians say that when they gathered and they were concerned about the future, and very properly so, I should say to you quite incidentally that Christians are people who are always concerned about the future. We're never meant to be imprisoned by the past -- we're never meant to be frustrated, no matter how exasperating the present moment may be....but we are the people with the future look, who think of an unfolding future and gear ourselves to face the present moment because we do know that there will be a tomorrow.

I'm thinking now quite parenthetically of two posters that I've seen in recent years. This has been a decade, you know, of the poster and the bumper sticker. A great deal of communicating, one to the other, has happened as we glue our eyes on what we read on the bumper in front of us, or when we go into a building and see the walls with their placards and their posters. Here's one poster that had a rather somber note -- an orange sunrise, a couple of brown blades of wheat, with a one-line legend:

I STILL BELIEVE IN TOMORROW

....no matter what you may say, the person is saying, I still believe in tomorrow -- that's hopeful.

On the other hand I remember seeing, the year of the Bicentennial, in Boston, a poster that smacked of dismay. I'd like to think that it appeared in the variety of things that were there quite unintentionally. This one simply read, without any graphics whatsoever:

DUE TO LACK OF INTEREST, TOMORROW HAS BEEN CANCELLED

....but you can't think in terms of no tomorrow. Tomorrow always comes -- and we're in duty bound to think in terms of the future.

Now those founding fathers as they thought in terms of the future, what do you suppose they did? Let me give you a very interesting episode. It's a matter of historical record: frustrated, exasperated as they were facing the trouble of that

present moment, they turned very properly to the wisest and oldest man in their company, Benjamin Franklin, for his advice and counsel. Reluctant to speak, after a while he did stand. Why don't I read for you the exact quotation:

"As he rose to his feet he spoke a few words based on Psalm 127 . . ."

(the text for today's sermon)

"From this brief talk came the spiritual foundation for this United States of America and the Declaration of Independence.

Benjamin Franklin said, 'I have lived a long time, and the longer I live the more convincing proof I see of this truth: that God governs the affairs of men, and if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His will, is it possible for an empire to rise without His notice? We have been assured in the Sacred Writing that 'Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.'

I firmly believe this, and I also believe that without His concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babylon.' "

. . . that's what Benjamin Franklin said.

And what happened after he said it? He suggested that they pray. And as a result of their praying they found unity, and the United States of America was born, and the date was July 4, two hundred and four years ago.

Now I hasten to say to you that there are two observations that must be made. One - they dealt with their present problem. They too were a people in trouble, only as they thought in terms of the future. Tomorrow cannot be cancelled, nor postponed, no matter how much we may seemingly think we can ignore it.

The second observation is this: they became independent only after they recognized their dependence upon God. You're not forgetting, are you, that before there was a so-called Declaration of Independence, they worked through a declaration of dependence. As the delegates responded to Franklin's call to prayer, they were also indicating their belief in a Scripture that he had expounded. What our founding fathers did was simply to bring God into the pic-

ture, to include Him in their future.

The moment had to come when they would declare in one way or another that a nation was meant to be about God's business - - and it's going to be a sad day for all of us when we forget that we are a nation under God, that we are to all intents and purposes a dependent people, dependent upon the will and the authority of God Himself. And to ignore this has always been to ignore it at great peril.

Another of George Bernard Shaw's plays is Joan of Arc. You may remember how he has the Maid from Orleans leaving her home and how she inspired the French people to battle against the English conquerer. In one scene young Prince Charles is complaining because Joan, obedient to her Heavenly vision, has rebuked his softness and his cowardice. With no desire to be a hero, he cries out: "I want to be just what I am! Why can't you mind your business, and let me mind mine?"

....Joan, the peasant girl, in her fanatical zeal replies,
"Minding your own business is like minding your own body.
It's the shortest way to make yourself sick. What is my
business? -- helping my mother at home. What is your
business? -- you spend your time petting lap-dogs and
sucking sugar-sticks. I tell thee, it is God's
business we are here to do, not our own."

Today we are a nation in trouble because there are too many of us who say, "I want to be just as I am - - don't trouble me." And all the while there's that echo from Heaven: "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it." This is God's world, and as one nation among many we're meant to be about His business in this world. Only as we look at our country, at the world, through the eyes of God can there be any hope for the future. I firmly believe this.

Let me read for you, at length perhaps, what an ethicist of the Southern Baptist Church, Dr. Valentine, has written when he has articulated what he believes to be God's concern for this world:

" . . . Jehovah-God was portrayed by the prophets as being concerned about such things as military alliances, the selling of debtors into slavery, the plundering of the poor by the rich, the cheating of the buyer by the seller, and the oppression of the weak by the strong. The God of the Bible, the God of Christians whom they know through personal faith in Jesus Christ is no abstract First Cause, or Prime Mover, or Great Unknown in the Great Somewhere who can be placated by a bit of discreet crying in the chapel. He is a personal God, who is very deeply and very definitely concerned about military alliances... racial segregation...the unconscionable profits of the oil industry... ..the indefensible price-fixing that honey-combs big business, and the criminal corruption that persists in organized labor. God is concerned about tax evasion, padded expense accounts, the exploitation of violence as entertainment, the fragmentation of the family. God is concerned about the one-hundred-billion-dollars-a-year-and-more which the world now spends on weapons . . . "

"Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it" - - We are frustrated by the present moment, we can't help but worry. We say to ourselves,

-- if we are unsafe on the streets today -- what
about tomorrow?

-- if Government is too big today -- what's it going
to be tomorrow?

-- if we can't pay our bills today, as a nation --
what about tomorrow?

-- if we can't handle our children and young people
today -- what about tomorrow?

-- if some of us today work from January to June in
order to pay our taxes, so support government
spending -- what about tomorrow, when perchance

fewer people will be working?

-- if there is corruption today, if it continues even

after, in good faith, we elected a president

who promised to clean up the mess -- if cor-

ruption continues today - - what about tomorrow?

We can't ignore the present without thinking in terms of the future. "Hope springs eternal within the human breast . . . "

As we think of the future we may recognize the fact that God will always have the last word, that we're meant to be a people under authority, that God's rules and regulations were meant to be respected. It cannot be ignored.

What is a nation? A nation is made up of people. I remember being rebuked once when at a church convention I was concerned about a particular matter, and I cried out to a person standing nearest to me, "Why doesn't the Church do something?" I can still feel the pressure of his fist against my abdomen when he said, "Why don't you do something?" Each person has to begin where he is with what he knows to be basic integrity and a respect for a morality under God.

Warren Bennis was President of the University of Cincinnati. He wrote: "In 1960 when I made some organizational studies for the State Department I quickly learned that junior foreign service officers often decided not to tell their bosses what they knew from the field situation because they believed their bosses would not accept it....only to learn later, the bosses felt the same way, but in turn kept silent for fear their bosses would disapprove...." Where does one begin? He begins with himself.

It's reminiscent, of course, of Khrushchev's answer. When he was last here he conducted a news conference in New York. He entertained questions from people who were present, with the understanding that they would write them out, and then the interpreter would read them.

...this question was put to him: "You, sir, were close to

Stalin -- what were you doing during all his crimes that you later exposed?" Khrushchev became livid with rage -- "Who asked that question? -- let him stand up!" Nobody stood. Then Khrushchev said: "That's what I was doing -- keeping silent -- not standing for what I believe to be right!"

(?)
John Steinbruch/once wrote, as he reflected upon the situation in America, what I thought was a very simplistic answer:

"We no longer live by the rules, we no longer respect the rules. There was a day when people did. They might not always have obeyed them, but they knew that there were rules. When the rules were broken, they knew that they had done wrong.

-- now, if you can get by with it, do it! Anyone else would if he had the chance."

Adlai Stephenson was a great statesman. He once, too, I suppose, became livid with rage when he thought of a certain politician whose standards were very, very low, if he had any standards at all. As he thought of him Stephenson said: "The trouble with that man is, he's really not a bad person -- if he were a bad person I'd know how to handle him...but he doesn't much care! He really doesn't know the difference between right and wrong."

Maybe that's why we're in deep trouble -- we've forgotten to teach people respect for the basics.....and as you might expect me to say it from this sacred desk, respect for God's rules, respect for God's laws. It's as simple as all that! We're meant to be a nation under God -- that simply means subservient to God.

After World War II they set about in Germany to rebuild some of their churches. There was a time of reconstruction. One church remembered with a great measure of pride that heroic-sized statue of Jesus Christ that stood in front of the church.

When they began to clear the rubble the workmen haply discovered practically all of the statue, and they were able to restore it and reconstruct it, except that one thing was missing: nowhere could they find the hands.

...they had a bright idea -- they restored the
statue without the hands and then they wrote
beneath the statue a sign:

CHRIST HAS NO HANDS -- BUT YOURS

If God's work is to be done today, by Americans, it has to be done by you, and by me. That's the point at which we begin. Otherwise we remain a nation in trouble -- deep trouble.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

IN OBSERVANCE OF THE ORDINATION OF BRUCE BURKNESS
"AS ONE TO ANOTHER"

GRACE, MERCY and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

You may or may not have noticed, but as this hymn was being concluded the Rev. Bruce Jeffrey Burkness took his seat in the congregation alongside of members of his family. He is identifying with you, and those who are near and dear to him, and that's exactly the way that it ought to be. For, let it be clearly said, that while this sermon is being preached directly and personally to him, every single one of you who happens to be present is identified in a very real way with the fact of his ordination --

-- his parents who cradled him in their arms and brought him to a baptismal font where he was named for Jesus Christ and set before him a good example....

-- there are those of you in this place who taught him in Sunday School -- Winifred is present, who was his small group teacher in catechetical class....

-- there are his co-workers in Youth Ministry, who thoroughly enjoyed yoking their heart and their hands with him as they invested their time and energy, one week after another, in a summer not so long ago.....

And whether you know him by name or not, he is a member of the Body of Christ, you are identified with him, you are related to him -- because every single Christian is in duty bound to offer the prayer that God will send forth laborers into His harvest. And every time you have offered a prayer that God would

raise up such effective witnesses, God has answered that prayer -- and today specifically with His servant Bruce Jeffrey Burkness. So very naturally he is seated among you, and very naturally you should hear what I have to say to him on this day as we celebrate his ordination as one who has been set aside for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

In my wallet I carry around a slip of paper on which someone has written, one of the three people in this world who love me most, -- has written a message that I try not to forget. In his handwriting, I recall these words:

"There are at least two very important days in the life of every person . . ."

(the implication, of course, is that there should be two days of great importance in the life of every person)

" . . . The first is the day in which he was born; and the second? -- that day in which he discovers why he was born."

Some people never discover what it was that God had in mind for them as He granted them birth and gave them the opportunity to live. You are among the fortunate ones, Pastor Burkness, for anyone who is set aside as a Minister of the Word and Sacraments is given to understand in no uncertain way why he was born.

Some of us have reason to believe that from the very beginning of the world God had you in mind. Some of us have reason to believe that when our Lord was here on earth, and when He said to His disciples, on the day when He spoke to them for the last time: "Now you go preach, teach, baptize and make disciples!" -- that at that very moment God had one such as you in mind.

It's always a tragic thing for any person to live out the days of his years and never fully understand what God had in mind for him. A pastor is a person for whom the answer is given: "I have called you by name -- you are mine! Now you go, you preach, you teach, you baptize, you make disciples." It's an awesome thing to know that you should have no question in your mind

about your identity, that there should be no question as to what you're meant to do and the kind of person you're meant to be.

The title for this morning's sermon has been carefully chosen, for I knew that when I would come to this sacred desk I would come as one who has traveled the road a considerably longer time and a greater distance than the person that we honor this morning. I find myself almost in the position of the Apostle Paul when he wrote a letter to a man named Timothy, recognized the responsibility to write to Timothy, for Paul was older -- Timothy was younger; Paul was ending his ministry -- Timothy was just beginning it. And as he wrote to that man, as one to another, he said something like this:

"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young. See that they look up to you, because you are an example to believers, in your speech and behavior, in your love, in your faith and in your sincerity."

I am constrained to answer the question that ought to be in the minds of all of you who are here: Just what is it to be a pastor?

I am firmly convinced that a pastor is a particular person -- that's why we have ordination, that's why we have special preparation, that's why we emphasize the fact that there is such a thing as a call, that as Wordsworth said, and said properly, "God does have a few whom He whispers in the ear, and He speaks as He may not speak to others." What is a pastor? -- a pastor is a particular person.

Once when I was on the campus of St. Olaf in Northfield, Minnesota, I had the good fortune to sit at the feet of a very wonderful person, one of their professors....and a sculptor. And I recall how he said to us very earnestly, as we envied him and his gifts and his skills -- he put us very much at ease -- he said, "An artist is not a special kind of person; but each person is a special kind of artist."

Now let me apply that to being a pastor. Every Christian is special in

God's sight because as a baptized person he is a child of God, and he's declared full well as being part of the Family of God. This makes every one of us special because we're called and we're being nurtured, and we have work to do for God. But every now and then God sets someone else aside and calls them to a particular task, to a special ministry, and that's what makes a pastor particular.

I have a way of putting it this way -- I've never seen it in print, but maybe you'll understand what I am trying to say, which this is:

A pastor is God's particular man,
-- for a particular purpose
-- to a particular people
-- in a particular place and at a particular time.

You ought not to have any difficulty in appreciating that because I'm willing to believe that almost every single one of us at one time or another has had our lives particularly touched by a pastor, by a pastor who has touched our lives in a way that none other has. I believe this to be true. It is true in my own life that again and ever so often God raised up His man of God, His special person of God, to minister to me in a very special way.

The title for this morning's sermon, again I say, has been very carefully chosen: "As One To Another" -- and with all the strength that I can command I now say to you as you begin your ministry, Pastor Bruce Jeffrey Burkness, -- as I have preached.....so now you will preach

-- as I have taught catechetical classes.....now you will
teach catechetical classes
-- as I have baptized.....so now you will baptize
-- as I have interpreted, under the influence of the
Holy Spirit, the Word of God.....so now you will stand
at a sacred desk and you will preach
-- as I have counseled you, and as I have seen myself in

duty bound to bring the God-perspective to the issue at hand.....so now you will counsel people and you will specialize in introducing the God-perspective to the issue at hand

-- as I have been with those who have known great joy and committed themselves anew to Jesus Christ....so now you will be with people

-- as I have stood by a grave and allowed people to see someone that they loved ushered into God's nearer presence.....so now you will be with them

From my vantage-point of these forty years I pray God's richest blessing upon you.

Now, having said all of that, I would remind you, sir, that you are on pilgrimage. I would remind you first, however, that while you have been ordained, you are no less nor more a child of God than anybody else -- while you have been ordained, you are no more or less a sinner than those people to whom God will send you to provide a shepherding care. As you get on your knees and say, "God be merciful to me, a sinner" and receive the assurance that God loves you, so the people for whom God has given you responsibility will likewise pray. We are all sinners, and you will prove yourself a more effective minister to them as you see yourself as a brand plucked from the burning, as one being saved for a particular purpose, to introduce other people to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Now I am reminded of the fact that you and I have been on pilgrimage, and that's precisely what a pastor is: a pastor is a person on pilgrimage, seeking holy places where he can bow his head, find his soul lifted up, put his fingers to his lips and reverently whisper the name of GOD. I recall so well the great joy that I knew when I could seek you out and tell you it was possible for you

to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. A gift had been provided, a gift that was made as an investment in your future, because there were those who couldn't think of your being a Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ without having perhaps the benefit of having walked where Jesus walked.

I went with you on that pilgrimage. I have an exceedingly precious memory of standing by your side and kneeling with you at certain sacred sites. I can hear you read the Scripture, even to this very moment, as you read it in certain places where Jesus walked. I was with you in Bethlehem, I was with you in Nazareth, I was with you in Cana, I was with you in Jerusalem. You have been where Jesus walked.

But now in God's plan for your life you will be going to St. John Lutheran Church in Emporium, Pennsylvania. There will be any number of people for whom you will have shepherding care who will never have the good fortune to make that pilgrimage....

...they will never know what it is to stand by the
Lake of Galilee....

...they will never know what it is to sleep beneath
Judaean stars....

...they will never know what it is to have stood as you
did on the Mount of Ascension and recall the
parting command of Jesus Christ....

....they will never have been able to walk where Jesus walked.

You have walked where Jesus walked. But in God's plan for your life now you are to go to these people in Emporium, Pennsylvania, and to walk among them as Jesus walked. Let me say it again: having walked where He did, you now will walk among them as Jesus did....which is simply to suggest that you are to be to those people as Jesus Christ. You are possessed by Jesus Christ, you are God's person, you are God's special person -- to preach, to teach, to baptize, to heal, and to introduce people to the fact of Jesus Christ.

A pilgrim is one who never loses sight of what his directive is; a pilgrim is one who never loses sight of his objective. A pilgrim is one who never loses sight of his direction. A pilgrim is one who is constantly aware of who he is. I kept reminding you, Bruce, that when you went on that trip to the Holy Land, you were not just a tourist and you're not just one who was meant to be a spectator, to see certain things. But you were meant to identify with what it was that took place there, that it might leave an indelible mark upon the fabric of your soul. Now, as you walk as Jesus walked, there ought never to be a moment in Emporium, Pennsylvania, where as you shepherd these people, they will be not made conscious of Jesus Christ. That is an awesome thing -- to be in the presence of other people and to make people feel that Jesus Christ is near. In God's wonderful plan for salvation He's had you in mind.

It will not be easy, but it will be glorious, it will be demanding. I can say to you, Bruce, for which I thank God constantly -- I have never had a day when I railed against God for calling me into the ministry, but to the contrary my days have been filled with an overflowing measure of gratitude that God should see fit to use me, His humble servant, to shepherd people in the name of Jesus Christ.

You will find in your parish people who will love you, people who will respect you, people who will always appeal to the better side of your nature. In your first parish you will find also people who will pray for you, every single day -- just as when I came to this congregation as a stranger and in no time at all found people who would love me, and pray for me.

I should also tell you, Bruce, you'll find people who can cut you down to size, and that all goes with it and it's a salutary thing that it should happen. They also serve who do that sort of thing. I must tell you again about my friend P. D. Brown, who was pastor of a church in Salisbury, North Carolina, who one day when he was about to leave that parish to go and serve elsewhere, said to a lady who came to him and said, "Pastor, why are you going?"...and I think he answered

nobly -- he said he was going to leave because he'd like to do a better piece of work somewhere else. And she said, "Well why don't you stay here and do a better piece of work?" . . . they also serve who do this kind of thing for you, Bruce. And may God raise them up faithfully that you may fulfill your obligation day in and day out where God sees fit to have you serve.

I wish that Pastor David could be here to share this day with you. When I told him that we were planning it for you he knew a measure of rejoicing in his voice as he said, "My spirit will be there with you." Now you have been made a minister. Notice what I said: you have been made a minister, you have not chosen the ministry. The ministry has chosen you. And that's what makes it all the more wonderful.

I must tell you this, that when Winifred had you in class I was able to visit one day, and when the class was over you came to me and you asked me a question -- you were puzzled. Winifred evidently was teaching you about the 'old' Adam and the 'new' Adam. And you asked me, as though she hadn't answered you -- you asked me, "What does it mean, Pastor?" I must have felt that I didn't answer you adequately because I wrote you a letter and I was reading this morning that letter that I wrote you. Now, Pastor Burkness, this will be the burden of your life from here on in, trying to make real to people that there is a difference between the old Adam and the new Adam, and trying to allow people to discover the difference in the joy that comes to one who is born anew in Jesus Christ. You and I have reason to believe that a person is less than what he ought to be until he becomes a new man in Jesus Christ.

In my office here at the church I have the motto of my life, Paul's testimony to Christians who lived in Colossae: "So naturally we preach Christ. We teach every man that we can all that we know about Him, that we might bring him up to his full stature in Jesus Christ. This is what I am doing all the time with all the strength that God gives me." I covet for you, Pastor Burkness, that

kind of possession of mind and soul that as you continue on pilgrimage you may be bringing every person up to his full stature in Jesus Christ.

In the first parish that I served I followed a man who had been there for almost fifty years. Not much of an administrator, not much of a preacher, really, but a man whose heart was as big as the world with the love of Jesus Christ. He saw every person as an object of his concern. I recall one day walking down Market Street with him when there was a simple-minded woman, honestly she was, and I'm not saying that in a derogatory manner . . . but she deliberately crossed the street that she might stand in front of this man of God -- and I can still hear the echo of her words: "Dr. Bannen, when I die and go to Heaven, you're the first person for whom I will look, and when I'll find you I'll take you by the hand and tell all the other people that I've met up there that you're the one who taught me the way to Heaven."

One of these days perhaps my pilgrimage will be concluded, and I should count myself fortunate if in Heaven I should meet one person who could say to me: "I am here because you pointed the way."

Never lose sight of your objective, Pastor, and then, as it is written in the musical "Carrousel" -- "When today is a long time ago" -- some day you'll have your fortieth anniversary. I will not be here to see that day. But I would covet for you that when it comes, they could say of you as Goldsmith said of the village preacher:

"Near yonder copse, where once the garden smiled,
And still where many a garden flower grows wild;
There, where a few torn shrubs the place disclose,
The village preacher's modest mansion rose.
A man he was to all the country dear,
And passing rich with forty pounds a year;
Remote from towns he ran his godly race,
Nor e'er had changed, nor wished to change his place;
Unpracticed he to fawn, or seek for power,
By doctrines fashioned to the varying hour;
Far other aims his heart had learned to prize,
More skilled to raise the wretched than to rise.

"His house was known to all the vagrant train,
He chid their wanderings, but relieved their pain;
The long-remembered beggar was his guest,
Whose beard descending swept his aged breast;
The ruined spendthrift, now no longer proud,
Claimed kindred there, and had his claims allowed;
The broken soldier, kindly bade to stay,
Sat by his fire, and talked the night away,
Wept o'er his wounds, or, tales of sorrow done,
Shouldered his crutch and showed how fields were won.
Pleased with his guests, the good man learned to glow,
And quite forgot their vices in their woe;
Careless their merits or their faults to scan,
His pity gave ere charity began.

" Thus to relieve the wretched was his pride,
And e'en his failings leaned to virtue's side;
But in his duty, prompt at every call,
He watched and wept, he prayed and felt for all;
And, as a bird each fond endearment tries
To tempt its new-fledged offspring to the skies,
He tried each art, reproved each dull delay,
Allured to brighter worlds, and led the way.

"Beside the bed where parting life was laid,
And sorrow, guilt, and pain, by turns dismayed,
The reverend champion stood. At his control
Despair and anguish fled the struggling soul;
Comfort came down the trembling wretch to raise,
And his last faltering accents whispered praise. "

(now this particularly, Pastor Burkness)

" At church, with meek and unaffected grace,
His looks adorned the venerable place;
Truth from his lips prevailed with double sway,
And fools who came to scoff remained to pray.
The service past, around the pious man,
With steady zeal, each honest rustic ran;
E'en children followed, with endearing wile,
And plucked his gown, to share the good man's smile.
His ready smile a parent's warmth expressed,
Their welfare pleased him, and their cares distressed;
To them his heart, his love, his griefs were given,
But all his serious thoughts had rest in heaven.
As some tall cliff that lifts its awful form,
Swells from the vale, and midway leaves the storm,
Though round its breast the rolling clouds are spread,
Eternal sunshine settles on its head . . . "

So I thank God that I can begin part of this pilgrimage with you. I wish
you well, I pray God's blessing upon all that lies ahead.

I remember the first time I went to Europe, and one of the things I wanted

most was to sleep atop an Alpine peak, to see the sun set, and to see the sun rise. Only a handful of us were able to do it.

In the morning as I looked at the rising sun I turned, and there beside me was a Belgian priest. I could not speak Flemish. He could speak only a little bit of English. He recognized my clerical collar and identified me as a fellow pilgrim. Realizing that our brief visit was coming to a close, he spoke in faltering English - - "I wish you a safe journey all the way home" - - and as he spoke the final word he punctuated it by casting his eyes heavenward. So I salute you - - - at the beginning of your pilgrimage.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"ON BEING PERFECT"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Matthew 5:48

I do not enjoy the role of being a task-master. No one, I presume, likes to be cast with that measure of responsibility, of bringing to the attention of someone else that his level of performance is not what it should have been.

I remember how difficult it was for me a number of months ago to say to a certain person that what had been done should not have been done because it could have been done in a far better way -- there was no question about it. Her only response to me, that came rather quickly -- I felt too quickly -- "Well, nobody's perfect."

Upon reflection I asked myself, what did she mean by that? Was she taking me to task for rebuking her, as though I, a minister of the Gospel, should know full well that no one is perfect. I preach that to you, you know that I do, of course. And I've reminded you that every time we come to church we return pretty much as a lot of sinners, a bunch of people who have been here the week before, and you begin the worship experience by telling God that we recognize our shortcomings, our imperfections, our sinfulness. And I've also told you on more than one occasion that every single one of us remains a sinner to the day that he dies...

...so was she rebuking me, saying, "Nobody's perfect" --
as though I ought to know?

Or was she allowing herself a measure of excuse? -- as though she could very easily settle in to that kind of performance? There was a limit to what she was going to do, no question about it. I suppose the thing that troubled me most was the fact that there seemed to be no inclination to say, "I hope I can improve."

Why do I begin this sermon in this manner? For the simple reason that I have been troubled for years by a passage of Scripture, spoken presumably by Jesus Christ:

"Be ye therefore perfect, as your
Father in Heaven is perfect."

I have always thought of Jesus Christ as the supreme realist. After all, that's why He came to earth, because He knew exactly our miserable condition. Read the record exactly as it happens to be. No dreamy-eyed idealist, this Jesus Christ -- the supreme realist who was willing to pay the price for our salvation. Who knows human nature better than He? Now there's that troublesome passage of Scripture. Try as I may, I cannot pretend that it says anything else but what it does!

"Be ye therefore perfect, as your
Father in Heaven is perfect."

Had my Lord said to me, "Be ye perfect . . ." -- and then named my neighbor down the street -- who in my judgment doesn't nearly come up to my standard! -- I'd have no trouble with the text. But when our Lord says:

"Be ye therefore perfect, as your
Heavenly Father is perfect"

....that's something else. Our Blessed Lord is laying down in front of us a standard which is essentially a standard of perfection. It is not even high-grade mediocrity.

What are we to make of it? I cannot tell you that the text means something else other than what it says. Even J. B. Phillips, one of my favorite translators, who in the judgment of some people has offered not so much a translation as an interpretation of Scripture -- continues to use the word perfect. I do not substitute any other word. So the text is as it is:

"Be ye therefore perfect, as your
Father in Heaven is perfect."

What now shall we make of it?

What are we to understand as perfection? When is a thing perfect? -- when a thing has reached a stage of maturation, when a thing is complete, when a thing is what it ought to be. Will you settle for that kind of a description right now? Granted that you could, then our Blessed Lord is saying to us that we ought to strive after this sort of thing. Is it within the realm of possibility? How you answer that I don't know, but I hear ringing in my ears the words of a man who said: "A man's reach should exceed his grasp -- or what's a heaven for?"

And by the very same token I do know that when we come here Sunday after Sunday, we say that we are sinners -- I, by the authority vested in me as a minister of the Church, can say to you, "The Almighty and merciful God grant unto you, being penitent, pardon and remission of all your sins, time for amendment of life, and the grace and comfort of his Holy Spirit " -- how do you read that, except to recognize each day, a measure of time, as an opportunity to amend, to improve, to grow, to mature -- -- and that's what the Christian experience is all about. We are meant to grow, we are meant to improve, we are meant to strive after perfection.

I take myself to task as your pastor because I do not take lightly the responsibility which God has thrust upon me in your behalf. And that's why on occasion I find my heart strangely warmed when I see the evidence of growth in the lives of some of you. I should be very happy if every single member of this congregation would be in a position of saying, "I am today a better Christian than I was a year ago."

....I would be very happy if those of you who attend the hour of divine worship, to give heed to the preaching and the interpretation of the Scriptures, who come to receive the Sacrament of the Altar, who identify with this parish in all that it offers, could say "I have tangible evidence

that I am growing in grace, that I am, God be praised, farther down the road of Christian growth and development now than I was a year ago." What is striving after perfection but evidence of continuing growth?

Like any grandfather, I'm thrilled when the grandchildren come, as in the case of these two grandsons - - "Pop-Pop, let's go down to your study, let's see how much I've grown since the last time you measured me!" Inside my study door you can see it -- there are the checkered marks:

four feet, three inches

four feet, ten inches

....each has his own record. And then to discover yesterday that one of them now, with a measure of pride, takes joy in the thought that he's every inch as tall as his grandmother! - - evidence of growth, evidence of maturation. This is what it's all about! The Christian experience is a matter of life. And life is essentially a matter of growth, reaching one stage after another -- and always an objective.

I would be reluctant to submit you to a kind of an examination as to what might be the true indicator in your life of your Christian growth and development. My friend Bob Neumeyer, now of blessed memory, became the pastor of a church in Wilmington, Delaware that he thought was a sleeping giant. And after he had been there about six weeks he believed some radical treatment was necessary for that parish, and he sent every single member of the congregation a letter by registered mail -- there was to be no question about it, it would be received, it would be acknowledged. And inside that envelope he detailed for them the kind of thing which he honestly believed was evidence of Christian commitment and Christian growth and Christian development . . . and if they felt they could not measure up according to the standard which the Church Council had approved, their names would be removed from the church roll. A radical thing, of course. But sad indeed is that church that it cannot say

that its members are growing in grace, in their Christian commitment, in their discipleship.

I presume he had good authority for that sort of thing -- at least a precedent, for John Wesley -- that giant of Methodism who did more for his church, who did more for the cause of Christ in England than any person in his generation -- a secular historian said that of him.....John Wesley made much of two things:

-- one, he made much of conversion. He believed that every single person who embraced the Christian faith ought to recognize a turning-point in his life, that is, in a very pronounced way, where Jesus Christ became increasingly real, and became the master of his life....no question about it. Whether that turning-about came dramatically, as it did for him, or whether it came gradually, as it does for me -- nonetheless the realization should set in, and this you call conversion.

But John Wesley, bless his soul, was a smart man. He honestly believed it was never enough just for a person to become aware of the fact that he should face in the direction of Jesus Christ, or that he should be able to say that Jesus Christ was his Lord and Saviour and Master . . . John Wesley went on beyond that. And he said there should be such a thing as perfectionism, there should be honest-to-goodness evidence that a person is growing in grace, that he is striving after a better condition than what he's known before.

He believed that so earnestly that it's a matter now of record, in a certain year he went to Newcastle -- 1743 I think it was -- and when he went to Newcastle he said, "Let me see the church register." Then he met with the church deacons, the official board. And he made inquiry.

-- what was the nature of his inquiry? -- to establish evidence of Christian growth and development -- if you please, a striving after

perfection. And when he could not find it, or if he found evidence to the contrary, he deliberately purged the church rolls.... He removed from that congregation two people because they swore habitually -- he could not take this as evidence of Christian growth....two people were removed from the church rolls because they failed to keep the Sabbath ...17 were purged for habitual drunkenness.....two were purged for selling intoxicating liquors....three were purged because they were dissidents, quarrelsome people, always seeking an opportunity to take issue with someone or something....one man, understandably, was taken from the church rolls because he beat his wife....three were purged because they were known to be willful liars -- what in heaven's name could be accepted as evidence of Christian growth and development if a person persisted in deliberately telling falsehoods?

....in 1743, that's what he did in Newcastle, and purged 140 people from the church rolls because they did not give evidence of Christian growth -- striving after perfection.

Now I know that some of us become quite impatient with ourselves when we don't become better than we know we ought to be. And maybe there are folks who need to be taught that there are certain limitations. But by the same token, as far as Christian growth is concerned, Jesus Christ expects every single one of us to advance from one level to another.

One of the very great passages in Scripture is the concluding verse of the second Lesson that was read today by Dr. Holcomb: "That we may bring every man up to his full maturity in Jesus Christ . . ." For almost twenty-five years I have come to this sacred desk. What have I been trying to do? If it has not been clearly established in your minds at this point, then in heaven's name, if I am in duty bound to tell you, let me tell you now: in exalting Jesus Christ I

have been endeavoring to stimulate you and challenge you to your fullest in the love and the grace that He offers. And when the day comes that I can no longer do that, I have no right to be your pastor.

We are meant to grow, and mature. It takes a lot of love, it takes a lot of patience to help a person mature. to become better. Any one of us can help a person to become worse, without any effort at all. But it takes a bit of doing to help a person become better.

At the early service the man who sat nearest to me is my highly esteemed friend and fellow member of yours, Harry Richard, who has as beautiful a garden as anyone in the metropolitan Washington area. He'd been a farmer over in Virginia for a number of years and then he came to the metropolitan area. But he never lost the farmer's blood that courses fully and freely through his veins, and he has this perfectly beautiful garden. I know how Harry gets a garden like that -- day after day he never lets up -- he weeds...he cultivates...he prunes...he fertilizes....he waters -- day after day! Then when the maturing season sets in he can reach for the plum, he can reach for the apple, he can reach for the tomato, he can reach for the ear of corn. He's helped to bring it about with a great deal of love and patience.

Human beings are no different. Each one of us is meant to become better than he is, with loving concern and patience it's possible, I believe it. As I walk away from this sacred desk this morning I would remind you what appears in the Methodist Book of Discipline. When the candidate for ordination appears before the Bishop, one of the main questions in the examination is this: Are you striving after perfection? One bishop was a bit embarrassed, realistically, to ask the question, so he said to the candidate -- "If you feel that's an unreal question to ask, then let me ask you this one --" (not realizing that the second question would be far more difficult than the first one) "-- If you're not striving after perfection, then what is it that you're striving after?" If you're not moving in the direction of Heaven day by day -- then in what direction are you moving?
(this sermon transcribed as recorded)

"ABOUT PRAYER"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

hubs 11:13

It was one of those sensitive moments when, as you pass a door that leads into a room, without even opening the door you feel that someone is inside. That happened to me a number of months ago when in mid-morning I went by the corridor that leads to the Chapel of The Grateful Heart.

As you might know, all of us respect another when he is at prayer. There's a certain distance that ought to be kept when a person concerns himself with his conversation with God. I try to be sensitive to that fundamental fact. But nonetheless, as I tarried at that door suddenly ajar, I saw a highly esteemed member of this congregation. With a pastor's prerogative, I presume, I entered the chapel....with a fair degree of discretion I waited, and then I stood by his side.

He spoke first. And what did he say? As I recall it, these were his words, -- as he named his wife -- "She's scheduled for critical surgery later today -- it's hit me like a bolt out of the blue....I came here, I felt I should pray. Pastor, I don't know how to pray." That was the substance of what he had to say.

You might have been that person. You could very easily be in that kind or similar situation. The blow strikes -- you recognize your dependence upon God, you turn to Him habitually or instinctively. But in all honesty you admit, "I don't know how to pray."

This is the situation of many a person. Not that one doesn't have faith in prayer....not that one doesn't recognize the need to pray. But how to go about it? -- how to ask? -- how to receive? -- how to accept any one of three possible answers? -- and there are always three possible answers as far as prayer is con-

cerned.....

Yes -- and any number of you have come to me and told me how God has answered your prayers. And presumably you got exactly what you told God you wanted or needed.....

And there are those of you who have come to me and have said, "I prayed -- and God did not grant me my heart's desire." And I have suffered with you in your disappointment.....

And others of you have come and said, "I prayed, but -- - "....and in your dismay you admit nothing happened -- no Yes -- no specific No as such. But a kind of having-been-placed-on-hold, which is a third way by which God answers prayers: Yes - No - Not Yet, or Maybe...Wait-a-While....We'll see.

And who doesn't understand that? Because that's been our experience with people to whom we've gone and asked for something. And God doesn't seem to be much different. Some people whose favor we've sought:"Sure! Right away!"

....others -- "Sorry, can't do it."

Then we've gotten this answer: -- "Well, let me think about it - let's see - let's wait a while."

...and so we say God's no different.

I come to this sacred desk this morning, as you can see, to talk to you about prayer. To all intents and purposes this is a sermon about prayer, inspired by the closing verse of today's Gospel Lesson, the 13th verse of the 11th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, when Jesus, in response to a request that was made by His disciples, was teaching them about prayer -- and He concludes that magnificent section in the Bible with these words:

"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Now keep that text in mind as I suggest to you what could have happened but did

not happen.

Suppose I would have done what perhaps I should have done, and what I might do if this thing should ever happen to you -- suppose I had said to my friend, our fellow member, "Well, let's just sit down -- nothing is more important now than the answer to your question: How shall I pray?" I didn't do it then; with this kind of delayed action, let me do it now.

I would have said to him, well the very first thing that we need to keep in mind is the basic nature and character of God. To whom are you going to pray? What is He really like? There is no question about it now, you want to ask a favor -- -

...and then I would have told him, chapter and verse, an experience that I had when I began my ministry during World War II. A number of things were being rationed. I was in need of two automobile tires -- they were being rationed. My first inquiry was: Who is in a position to hear my plea? I was told who was on the Ration Board.

Then my next question was: Who's in charge? -- and I got that answer, a particular person was named.

Then I sought out people who happened to know that person, and I said, "What kind of a person is he? I know he has certain limitations within which he must operate -- but what's he really like? They tell me I should present my case -- is he approachable? -- will he understand?"

...it wasn't a case of whether or not he had the potential to answer...it wasn't the case that there were certain restraints imposed upon him. For the moment, when I was to present my plea, I needed to be given some kind of assurance as to the kind of person he was! And once I was given that kind of an understanding, I did not hesitate to go to his office....

So I would say to my friend, maybe one needs to begin at this point: What kind of

God is He to whom we now turn? And then, of course you know I'm in a perfect position because I spend my life doing this sort of thing: telling people about the nature and character of God. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And when Jesus was telling us once about prayer, He said, "When you think of God, think of Him as being father-like." And what is it to be a good father?

-- to be perfectly interested in those for whom you have responsibility

-- to be able to provide for their needs, and to grant their needs

according to your wisdom, as well as your capability

...so I would have said to my friend. But this is the point at which you begin: by having the right understanding as to the nature and character of God.

And then the second thing as a bit of ground-rule for praying, I would say to you: be absolutely honest. What is it that you really want? What is it that you think you really need? Be honest with yourself now.

It wasn't always a pleasant task for me, but being the father of two boys, on rare occasions they would come to me, and ask for certain things. And there may have been that uncomfortable moment when I would do the probing and say: "You want the car? - - " (don't fault me for this, now) " - - Where are you going to go? -- Who goes with you? -- When do you plan to come back? - - " Or occasionally it might have been - - (and I am a soft touch, for ten dollars -- not very often) " - - Be honest with me now, what do you plan to do with it?"

I want to be as honest with you as I can when I say that sometimes we're not very honest with one another, and we're not very honest with God. How foolish can we be! - - when God who searches the mind of man and knows his heart, finds us being evasive and not always honest with Him.

I give this to you on good authority - - Augustine, one of the greatest of Church Fathers, was a rascal at a certain time in his life. You name any sin, and there was a period in Augustine's life when he had done it, or probably thought it up. But Augustine was also the kind of a person -- and there's much to be said for

this, and hear me carefully - - - when he was bad, he really wanted to be good. And the other side of the coin - - - this may surprise you - - - when he was good, he wanted to be bad! It's a matter of record -- by his own confession -- again and again he would pray: "O God, make me pure - - "

(and then he'd offer in a whispered tone) " - - but not tonight!"

And there are some of us like that -- when we're absolutely honest.

And that's exactly what God wants us to be, even when we approach Him... for our sake. For don't forget, He probes the heart of man and knows his mind.

The third ground-rule that I would suggest that you keep in mind when you say, "I don't know how to pray" is this: Trust God's wisdom, just as you trust His capability. If you honestly believe that God has something that you need, then trust Him to give it to you - - or to withhold it. And that's not easy.

I can say to you, I've lived long enough to thank God for the prayers that He's answered in the affirmative, and to the day I die I will praise Him for all the wonderful things that He's offered me, and for which on occasion I have asked . . . and I can also tell you, just as soberly, I have learned to thank Him for certain things that I sought that He never saw fit to give. This is the third ground-rule - - as you trust Him for His capability to grant, trust Him for His wisdom.

And the fourth thing to keep in mind in this whole business of praying is inspired by the text for this sermon:

"How much more shall your heavenly Father give
the Holy Spirit to them who ask him? . . ."

The thing that you and I need to remember most about prayer is not what we get in our hands - - not what we can put in a safe deposit box. The thing that we value most in praying should be the relationship that remains as the bottom line.

As homespun as any illustration I can give you right now is this: being the father of two sons, being the grandfather of two grandsons -- as any parent or

grandparent knows, there are those moments that we prize, when they seek us out and ask us for something. We're always happy when we might be in that position, to be able to help, or to give.

But I should be very happy, as long as they have memory, that they might not recall as much what it was that they got as the fact that they were perfectly free to come . . . and that whatever it was that they received or did not receive - - this wonderful relationship of trust and respect in one person in particular would hold them in good stead.

Now, God is like that - - even more-so. For God says, "The thing that I want most to give you is My Spirit. And when you and I receive the Spirit of God we can have that measure of peace which holds us in good stead...even though the situation in which we may find ourselves may not significantly change - -
...and that's something to remember.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"ON LYING"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Colossians 3:9

The voice was the voice of my mother, who suddenly found me sitting on the porch step, and she said to me, "What do you have in your hand?"

...and I answered, "Five pennies."

Her next question was: "Who gave them to you?"

...and my answer was, "Grandpa John Shaffer."

The next question was, "Where did you see him?"

...and my answer was, "Down at Weaver's Ice Cream Store."

....sounds good, doesn't it? A boy, years and years ago when five pennies was almost the equivalent of five dollars, so it would seem today -- having been given those five pennies by a grand old man, who spent his time paying attention to kids -- and particularly down at Weaver's Velvet Brand Ice Cream Store.

Only one thing wrong with everything I've told you so far -- each answer that I gave my mother was a deliberate lie. I had five pennies, all right, but Grandpa John Shaffer didn't give them to me, and I didn't see Grandpa John Shaffer at Weaver's Velvet Brand Ice Cream Store. Those five pennies I had stolen.

Those were the days when milk was ten cents a quart, and you left your money on the milk bottle on the back porch and the milkman came the next day, of course, emptied the bottle and the ten cents, left you a full quart of milk, took the bottle to use it then to be re-filled for next day's delivery. It's my earliest recollection of lying, it's my earliest recollection of committing a sin. I am sure I committed other sins, but that's the one I happen to remember more than any other sin that I committed in the days of my childhood.

Of all the sins we commit, I'm suggesting to you now the one that's easiest to commit is the sin of lying. If I were to ask you this morning, engage you in some kind of a quiz: "What do you suppose, of all the Ten Commandments, is

the easiest one to break, to disobey?"

...and I presume some of you would say, "Well, it depends upon your age, it depends

upon where you happen to be and what the situation is."

But I'm going to suggest to you this morning that of all the sins and of all the Commandments, the one that's easiest to disobey -- all other things being equal -- could be the sin of lying.

One doesn't have to do much, you see, to do it. You simply fabricate on the spot. You are pressured, it comes very easily.

Why do people lie? A number of different reasons why people lie - - -

...to get themselves out of an embarrassing situation -- it's

the quickest way out

...or to get somebody off of your back -- you tell a falsehood

...or perhaps to exalt your ego -- surprising how that can be

done at a very early age. You tell a lie -- you exaggerate,

you stretch the truth -- something happens to you and you

think big, even if you have to tell a lie to do it

It happens so many different ways, it happens so many times, and it happens so very, very easily.

I think I am correct when I tell you it was the Wall Street Journal not so long ago that carried an article about the Harvard Business School. And one of the courses it was offering for executives, they were simulating a game, and as the person took that course he would be graded to the degree of his success in being able to out-maneuver or to exploit his competition. The objective in that course was to prove yourself smart, and be able to come home with the biggest contract. The professor said, "Frankly you ought to know that we live in a dog-eat-

dog world, and in all likelihood the person who gets the highest grade in this course will be the person who is willing to lie - - and the person who cannot compromise his convictions will not come off quite as easily."

That justified it -- they said, "That's the kind of a world in which we live - - you simply have to outwit the other fellow, and if you have to lie to do it, you lie to do it! The object is to come out ahead." ...now they rationalize, the professor had a very good name for it: strategic misrepresentation -- you don't tell the truth because your strategy dictates that if you're going to outwit that fellow you tell a lie in order to do it.

We suffer a great deal in this day and age by the fancy words that we use to council what is downright diabolical. "Strategic misrepresentation" -- no matter how you say it, no matter how you coin the phrase, it's lying.

There was a woman once who seemed to be guilt-stricken because she exaggerated. One day she went to her pastor to discuss this problem and she kept saying again and again - - "Pastor, I don't know what to do about it. I exaggerate, I stretch the truth." He looked her straight in the eye and said, "Madam, call it lying." Fortunately she was of a generation that had been brought up to respect the Commandments, and knew exactly what lying was. Sooner or later we have to be driven back to the meaning and the purpose of the Ten Commandments. God knew exactly what He had in mind when He laid down the law, when He provided His people with a set of absolutes: "This is it -- this is what you must do.....this is what you ought not to do - - " Not because God wants His ego glorified, not because God wants to be recognized as somebody who's seated up there on a throne, telling people off and calling it as He thinks it ought to be called, and calling all the shots.

I sometimes think if I were stripped of my pulpit and found myself out standing on the street corner and talking the jargon of people who went by who never came to a church - - I'd find myself inclined to tell those people out there that God is nothing but common sense as far as life is concerned. If they can't understand the vocabulary that I'm accustomed to use within the confines of a room such

as this, I think I'd begin by saying, "God is common sense . . . "

...I'd also tell them that sooner or later life has a way of forcing people to accept the reality of the truths of God.

So God gave the Ten Commandments because He was reading life exactly as it is, and God gave the Ten Commandments for our good and for our benefit.

What happens when people lie? Once you know it, you don't trust them. And who wants to live in a world where people cannot be trusted? It happens so easily: -- we tell fibs, we tell falsehoods --

-- the secretary receives the incoming call. In the inter-com she connects with the executive at his desk, she informs him that the call has come, she tells him who the caller is....
...for any number of reasons the executive doesn't want to engage that person in conversation -- he knows it means some hassle -- it also means that he may have to give some information that he doesn't want to give or he doesn't have yet....or he may also have to admit that he hasn't gotten around to what he promised the man.....for whatever may be the reason, he tells his secretary, "Tell him I'm not in" -- - it will happen a thousand times tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon -- within five miles of where you happen to be seated right now.

It becomes a life-style. What's wrong with it? It's a lie, it's not the truth. What's wrong with it? One day that secretary is going to confront her boss, and she's going to ask the question: "What happened to that raise that you promised me? -- I've now been here six months -- you promised me a raise."

....He answers, "Well the committee just didn't see fit to approve it."

...will she believe or won't she believe him? He's the same man who that very morning had said when the call came in, "Tell him I'm not in." If one can tell a

lie at 10:00 o'clock in the morning, what reason have you to believe that he can't tell a lie at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon?

.....if I can tell a lie to that person, what reason do you

have to believe that I won't tell a lie to you?....

That's what's wrong with lying. And who wants to live in a world where people cannot be trusted.

When people figured out the meaning of the Devil, he's the slanderer -- that's the Greek word for diablos -- the diabolical one -- he doesn't tell the whole truth. This is what's wrong with lying: it takes more than one lie before the story is finally told. You see, I didn't see Grandpa Shaffer at all the day I had those five pennies in my hand.....and I didn't see him at Weaver's Velvet Brand Ice Cream Store, either. I just found myself telling one lie after another -- that's the vicious thing about lying -- one lie leads to another. It's the trail of lies behind you, and who wants to be that kind of person, who wants to do business with that kind of person?

All of this is prompted by the second Lesson that was read today by Kim. The Apostle Paul was a man who got around a great deal. He earned his money mending tents. There was preacher blood coursing through his veins. He observed the human scene wherever he went. He went from one town to another and he saw the kind of hell that was let loose and the miserable state of interpersonal relationships. And then he happened to think of what Christians were meant to be in a world like that. The Apostle Paul was absolutely convinced that Christians were meant to be different, and that's why once when he wrote a letter to some Christians who lived in the city of Colossae, he ends up in that third chapter by saying, "Don't lie to one another. You live in a world where it's par for the course, but don't you lie." The Apostle Paul was the man who said that if any man becomes a Christian, he becomes a brand new person altogether, his manner of life is meant to be different.....

- - where before he told falsehoods, now he'll tell the truth

- - where before he hated people, now he'll begin to love them

- - where before he thought in terms only of his own life,
now he'll think in terms of other people
- - where before he was so completely self-centered, now he'll
order his actions according to his obedience to God.

There ought to be a distinctive difference about Christians -- really, there ought to be.

Christians are not the only good people in the world, but you ought to be able to tell that a man is a Christian. How? All those people out there who never see you in church - - all those people out there who never see you bending your knee in prayer - - how are they going to know that you're a Christian? Well, says the Apostle Paul, one way they're going to know it is to tell the truth! You don't lie!

I'm happy to tell you that in the days of the Early Church, when a person was baptized as a new convert, he went down into the stream to be immersed. Then when he came back up, one of the attendants of the deacons, an officer of the church, was standing there with a brand new outfit. And that's the outfit he wore after he came back from the water -- symbolic of the fact, now, that he was meant to be a different person.

There are many ways by which you can tell the difference. One of them is: you tell the truth, you don't lie. But it's such a subtle way of sinning! Did it ever occur to you how frequently you and I may invite somebody to commit this sin? When you and I go fishing for compliments, as an example -- the lady who's wearing the new dress -- she's so eager to know what her neighbor thinks of it....no comment so far....so she blurts out and says to her neighbor, "What do you think of my new dress?" Not wanting to hurt her friend, it's the easiest thing in the world for the neighbor to say something complimentary....but not necessarily true. So it's so easy to commit this sin.

We lie to ourselves, we can lie to other people. And if we could -- it happened at the very beginning, you know, back there in the Garden of Eden -- we'd

lie to God if we could....

"To thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man . . "

....that's what she wrote in the days when they carried around autograph books. I was a camper at Nawakwa, I was a teenager. She helped mark upon the fabric of my mind the necessity as a Christian of trying to be truthful. To the day that I die and as long as God gives me memory I'll sing the praise of my mother. She knew that I had stolen those five pennies. She never had the benefit of any Childhood and Adolescent courses in psychology -- she couldn't even pronounce the word adolescent, let alone psychology. She only knew one thing: one of her six kids had stolen five pennies and lied to her....

"Raymond!" -- I hear it ringing in my ears --

" . . You're not telling the truth!"

Fortunate indeed is that youngster who has a parent who in the name of God rebukes and chastizes with love, for the sake of the kid.

Alvin Rogness has written a book in which he refers to parents and teachers as "God's vice presidents" -- those who serve under Him in order to interpret His truths. That's a happy thought, isn't it? And when you and I are prone to commit sin, maybe we'll be stabilized a bit by the memory of those who tried to set us straight at an early day.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"WHEN LIFE TURNS ROBBER"

O GOD, We make so little time to do this sort of thing, to give some measure of undivided attention to the interpretation of Your Word. That we should make the most of the opportunity now, give us the guidance of Your Holy Spirit. Through Jesus Christ Thy Son, our Lord, Who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

First you have to have the story, and you need to get it straight. I'll begin by telling you his name, his name was Micah. And presumably he was the only son of his mother, who might have been a widow. She had come into some kind of an inheritance, a tidy sum of money, but concerned about her future, she made up her mind she would do her best to hold onto it as long as she possibly could. Now you need to know this, because this will give you some kind of an understanding for her eccentric kind of behavior which her son noticed.

Had there been a time-clock in those days -- and this was centuries and centuries before the time of Christ -- had there been a time-clock in those days the son might have noticed that at 2:00 o'clock in the morning his mother left the house and was gone for about 3/4 of an hour.....a week later, about midnight, he found she disappeared in much the same manner..... Well this kind of thing went on repeatedly. It was more, of course, than he could take -- not knowing that she had received this handsome inheritance, this tidy sum of money which she was guarding carefully.

He decided to pursue her one night, under cover of darkness, and he found out that she was taking the money where she had concealed it, and taking it to another place that she thought might be a bit safer. Now this was repeated time and time again.

He was also aware of the fact that this was not only disturbing her sleep but making her somewhat uneasy during the day....this burden: "My money -- I will hold

on to it! -- I will keep someone else from getting it!" It almost drove her mad, the possibility of losing it.

What does he do, this boy Micah? He reasons to himself on two different scores:

-- one, he says to himself, "She's not going to live forever, and the money will be eventually mine. Why can't I enjoy it now?"

-- and then to justify such reasoning, he satisfied himself by saying, if she doesn't have to worry about her money, if it's stolen, maybe she'll get a good night's sleep!

....so, he steals the money.

He's totally unprepared -- he might have been, however, the son of a Middle Eastern mother -- he's totally unprepared for what followed. When she discovered her money was gone she was completely distraught, completely unnerved. If she had been up-tight before, now she most certainly is beside herself. And she did what was typical for people in the Middle East to do -- stormed Heaven's gate and called for the wrath of the gods to descend upon the culprit:

"May he die a thousand deaths!"

"May his body break out with boils!"

"May he know the torment of the damned!"

....this is what he heard his mother say.

And then it occurred to him, what if the gods would hear? What if the gods would answer? To save himself from a possible plight, he goes to his mother with the money and tells her he had stolen the money.

She's pleased -- not particularly because her son's turned honest, but because the money is back. And now the two of them worry about the possibility of the money being stolen. So they get their heads together, and they come up with a very unusual thing, as far as our day is concerned, but not unusual in that day. Remember now, this is centuries and centuries before the time of Jesus Christ....

...they fall upon this happy idea that they will take their silver -- that's what form the money was -- and melt it into the statue of a god. For who would be so profane as to steal a god? And to make themselves doubly secure, they latch onto a wandering Levite priest, and they say to him, "You be our priest, you be the chaplain in our house, you keep an eye on our silver god." They thought they had it made.

But they failed to reckon with the fact which is a fundamental fact of life: anything that anyone has he could always lose! There is always the possibility of it being taken away. Life can always turn robber.

....there happened to have been, in that day, a wandering tribe of the tribe of Dan, 600 strong, who were landless, and they lived as they plundered and took advantage of the possessions of other people. They came into the area where Micah and his mother lived. One of their scouts cased the place where they were living...his eye fell upon the silver god -- his eyes fairly popped! He sees the priest. Very cleverly he says to the priest, "We are 600 strong -- we're going to take that silver god, and we're going to take you along with us. You can be our chaplain, you can be our priest." They exalted his ego -- a kind of promotion, if you please.....so off they go -- with the silver...the god...and the priest.

Micah comes home, discovers the great loss. He's beside himself. He and his mother gather together some friends, they pursue the robbers, and the robbers turn and laugh at them! -- they're 600 strong -- and they say, "Get away from here! We'll beat you into the dust. Do you think we're going to give you back your silver? Do you think we're going to give you back your god? Do you think we're going to let you take your priest?"

And then Micah turns toward Heaven, with what I would suggest to you would be the most lamentable of all cries that Heaven could hear, aside from the cry for pardon - - - Micah laments, "You have taken away my silver and my god -- what do

I have left?"

That could happen to you. It could happen to me. Anything that a man prizes, he stands to lose.

In the first parish that I was privileged to serve, I had a very good friend who on occasion would invite me to go to his country place. We'd park the car at some distance, we'd walk the lane, and we'd go up and down the stream that went through the middle of his property. And then we'd walk up to the hill, and when we got to the top he would stand there. And I can see him now as though it were happening this morning - - he'd look to the north, the south, to the east, the west....and almost unashamedly he'd turn to me and he'd say, "Can you understand, Padre, can you understand? -- the tremendous satisfaction that I get -- the pride of possession. It belongs to me."

Whether I articulated it or not, somewhat timid, nonetheless his pastor, I should like so much to have pricked his conscience by saying, "But you can't take it with you -- and you could stand to lose it. And if you did, what would you have left?"

I was fully aware of the fact that his brother-in-law, a member of the Church Council, told me, You don't remember too much of the Depression, do you? Well, I'd grown up in it. I was one of six kids, I knew the price that we paid. But my father was not an entrepreneur as this man was. And this man told me that in the early 1940's, how when the crash came, he went to bed a millionaire, only the next day to discover that he was practically a pauper. Now, of course, he had re-gained his position fairly well. And he said to me, "I'll tell you, Pastor, how I did it. I realized that there were certain things that had not been taken away. I lost much, but I still had three things . . . " Then he enumerated them for me -- he said, "I had my good name. I had lived in this community all of my life.

Fortunately, people had come to trust me and to respect me.

Frankly, Pastor, I tried always to represent decency and integrity - - that I did not lose . . .

" -- then, Pastor, I should tell you, through it all I had the devotion of my family. In fact, they even came closer to me when we lost so much. That was invaluable. This I had left. This no Wall Street crash could take from me. . . . "

...and then, of course, he knew that this is what I ought to hear, and fortunately he spoke it with conviction, "I had my faith in God, and I believed that His purpose for my life would be fulfilled, come wind or weather." He might have quoted Scripture: "I have learned that in all things therewith to be content.

I have learned that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord."

Could you have been that man -- if so much had been taken away from you? "They have taken away my silver and my god. What do I have left?"

During those post-war years, Winifred and I, living in that parsonage in South Williamsport, had more than one displaced person live with us, in fact as your Associate Pastor may remember, and his brother as well, the grand total could have been seven or eight families when it was all over, at different times. What a grand and good thing your Mistress of the Manse did when she had the responsibility of two growing children, to open her heart and her home for these people.

But every one of them was a blessing to us as well. I think of two of them in particular - -

...Alexander Kurilenko, Russian-born, an engineer, a man who had arrived -- only to be politically oppressed, and he fled to Estonia where he married Olma. Then the Russians pursued him there....and he went out the back door as they came in the front. He came to us several years later, with only a tiny sachel and the clothing on his back....

Why do I tell you this? - - having lost so much, he still had something left: his faith in God. It was not easy for him to worship in our Lutheran tradition. He had been Russian Orthodox. And one day it occurred to me that he ought to have the satisfaction of worshipping according to his own tradition. The Orthodox

priest lived some miles away, in Wilkes-Barre, and I suggested that perhaps we could make some contact and then we'd turn our parsonage over to him and anybody else that he might know who would welcome the opportunity of worshipping in their own particular manner. When we'd return from our service in Messiah's Church the parsonage would stink to high heaven with incense, but we were glad to be able to pay the price for what it meant to him. He was a re-investment of something that still remained -- his faith in God, that no political persecution could take away.

Then there was Jonas Eduardas Geirgedas Simaitis, a Lithuanian, who came to us as a teenager. His father, a school teacher, a rector, was put to death in the concentration camp. I tried to explain to this teenager and his brother how we worshipped in Messiah's Church, I tried to interpret it in English. And then I came to the Lord's Prayer. And I was surprised -- honestly I was, but not now upon reflection . . . he shook his head, and he said, "Pastor, if you don't mind, I shall go on praying the Lord's Prayer in the language that my parents taught me." So much had been taken away, but this remained, priceless -- the fact that his parents had taught him the fear of God, the fact that his parents had taught him to pray . . .

"They have taken away my silver and my god --
what do I have left?"

....almost anything that you value,
you stand to lose.

I read last evening in my devotional reading about Dr. William E. Sangster, a great British preacher, who had muscular atrophy set in, and his life went from one stage of deterioration to another. But magnificently he said, as he wrote in his journal, "I shall not be defeated! I shall keep my spirits up for the sake of my family!" He lived like a warrior, he died like a saint. His health was taken away, but his spirit remained strong.

I remember my father, of blessed memory, who died at 90 years of age,

saying to me, even when he was in his early 80's, "Raymond, when my health will be gone, I will have lost everything." He was energetic, he was ambitious, and it was a sad thing to see that deterioration set in....

....and then as though life would go full cycle for him, about two weeks before he died I happened to have been there. I held him in my arms -- as he once had held me in his arms....I washed his face -- as once he had washed my face....I combed his hair -- as once he had brushed mine. I took the initiative and prayed with him -- as once he had taken the initiative and prayed with me...

His health was gone. The earthly pilgrimage was being completed. But the devotion of his family and his faith in God was returning the greatest dividend ever.

If this should happen to you -- if you should stand to lose so much because life always has the possibility of turning robber - - - what would you have left?

For what it may be worth, let me read for you the lines of the poet:

"O the night was dark, and the night was late,
And the robbers came to rob him.
They picked the locks of the palace gate,
The robbers that came to rob him;
They picked the locks of the palace gate,
Seized his jewels and gems of state,
His coffers of gold and his priceless plate,
The robbers that came to rob him.

But loud laughed he in the morning red,
For what had the robbers robbed him?
All hidden safe as he slept in bed,
And the robbers came to rob him---
They robbed him not of a golden shred
Of his childish dreams in his wise old head,
And they're welcome to all things else, he said,
When the robbers came to rob him."

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"WHAT ABOUT DEPRESSION?"

(Psalm 42:11)

WE MAKE so little time, O God, to do this sort of thing, to give some measure of undivided attention to the interpretation of Your Word. That we should make the most of this now, give us the guidance of Your Holy Spirit. Lay hold not only upon the preacher but upon him who hears as well. Through Jesus Christ, Thy Son our Lord. Amen.

Psalm 42:11

There are two things that you'll need to keep in mind as this sermon is being preached today. One, the man who stands at the sacred desk is not a physician, nor is he a psychiatrist, an analyst or a psychologist. He is a pastor, who for more than four decades has been listening in on human hearts. That's the first thing that you will do well to keep in mind.

The second is this: that what you are about to hear is a sermon that could speak to the deep need of every single one of you. For what I am about to speak in your presence is the malady that eventually could afflict every one of us. I'm not so sure that any of you can allow yourself to believe that it can be avoided, that it can be escaped. I want to talk to you about depression.

It's inspired by the reading for the day that comes from our Daily Bible Passage schedule. Whether you're following it or not, today happens to be the day when we're reading Psalm 42. I have been anticipating that. Today's text is the 11th verse of Psalm #42:

"Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art
thou disquieted within me?
Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise him
who is the health of my countenance and my God."

They tell me that the thing that qualified psychiatrists deal with these days more than any other thing is not alcoholism -- it is depression. This

could be the kind of sermon that you'd wish would be on tape, for you may not need it today. Today you may be on the up-swing, today you may find it extremely difficult when others may bring to your attention that there were days when you were down in the depths -- not only days, but weeks and months. Some folks have experienced it for almost a year, this malady called depression. There are some who would like to think of it as a disorder, there are some who would like to think of it as a disturbing factor....there are some who would go so far as to even brand it as a disease.

In my readings recently I have come to recognize the fact that there are some in medical science who attribute depression to a chemical imbalance in a person's physical make-up, and so they have been able to prescribe. Occasionally they have a measure of success. But I have not come to this sacred desk this morning to talk to you about the kind of depression that stems from a chemical imbalance. I have come to talk to you about the kind of depression that may have eventually any one of five different ingredients, and we'll talk about those sooner or later as this sermon unfolds.

But let me make it perfectly plain to you, with all the strength that my soul can command, I know whereof I speak, for I too have known depression -- perhaps not as severely as some of you. But I have known it enough that I can fully appreciate as I read the pages of the Good Book, why the great ones could cry out as they did. I'm quoting for you now from the Bible:

"Cursed be the day that I was born - - "

(I'm quoting for you now from the Bible)

"O wretched one that I am, who can help me to flee? . . "

(I'm quoting now for you from the Bible, and if you do not recognize the source, you'll be surprised when I tell you)

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

....the words that came from the lips of Jesus Christ.

I am convinced, in my own thinking at least, that no one who has ever lived seriously - - - let me say it again - - - I am convinced at least in my own experience that no one who has ever lived seriously has ever been able to escape the possibility of depression, despair and despondency. It can happen to any one of us and it can happen to us at any age. It's a strange thing -- this may come as news to you - - but child psychologists are now dealing with depression in the lives of those who are very young!

.....and little did I realize that those who are much older than I have not been able to avoid it. Would you believe me if I were to tell you that as a pastor I have been called upon sometimes to minister to people 80 years of age who are depressed -- that's the only word that can be used. Now, what can be said from the Christian perspective?

The Christian faith does not have easy answers for hard questions. The Christian church has never dealt with easy answers to difficult problems, and depression is a difficult problem -- ask anyone who's experienced it. But the Christian faith has always something to say. I would not subscribe to the Christian religion if I did not believe this. What now could be offered to us from the Christian perspective?

I reach into the Book of the Psalms:

"Why art thou cast down, O my soul,
and why art thou disquieted within me?"

....that's the point at which to begin. You ask the question: Why am I as I am?

When I go to the physician, and I have something that's bothering me or I think that there's something that's wrong, what does he do? He probes...he punches....he stabs. He brings out his stethoscope -- he listens. He's looking -- where is it? What is it? That's why I'm willing to go to certain physicians, because I completely trust them in their earnest endeavor to find out what it is that's wrong. The Christian should begin with the same premise, and the Psalmist gives us a cue: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?"

It isn't too much to suggest that there's a reason for everything. There's a cause for everything. Some people are smart enough, some people are clever enough -- now brace yourself! -- and some people are honest enough to be able to find the cause for themselves. But not all of us can. And that's why, thank God, we may be in the position of going to someone who may be of some help to us -- even by the way they listen -- or, praise God -- by the questions they ask, or the insights they give us.

To the day I die I'll be grateful to God for certain people whom He raised up, who were honest enough with me -- put it right out there in front of me, and to call it by its rightful name.

Dr. Michael Cavanaugh, a psychiatrist on the West Coast, a devout Roman Catholic, has said that there are usually five ingredients for depression, and you and I may suffer from all of them, or a combination of several of them, if not just one of them in particular. Let me recall them for you as best I can:

- Anger can cause us to be depressed;
- Guilt can cause us to be depressed;
- Loneliness can cause us to be depressed;
- The sense of failure can cause us to be depressed;
- Grief can cause us to be depressed.

If I were a fundamentalist preacher, and I hope that I am basically fundamental, I could ring the changes at this point and say:

- Our sins cause us to be depressed.

...."Why art thou cast down, O my soul, why art thou
disquieted within me?"

Some of us are depressed because we're angry. Angry at what has happened to us, angry at what we have allowed to happen to us, angry because life is catching up with us -- or angry because we'll never be able to catch up with things as they are. Some of us become constantly depressed because we fail to accept the

fact that life brings about changes, and we become depressed.

I have my moments when I think I would write down in my journal certain truisms, and I think one that I would have to write repeatedly is this: Nothing ever is as was - - - there's this constant flux. And some of us become depressed because we are angry at this fact. The situation has changed -- people have changed -- I have changed.

I told you, didn't I, about the Vermonter, that old codger up there, bent by the years, and the tourist came and said to him, "I guess, old as you are, you've seen a lot of changes in your time, haven't you?"

...and he said, "Yup -- and I've

been against every one of them."

Some of us can be like that -- refuse to accept the fact of change -- change in ourselves....change in other people....change in the world round about us. And we get angry because we can't do anything about it.

I'm ashamed of myself, of the needless amount of energy that I have burned up in my refusal to accept the fact that things are as they are.

Some of us become depressed because of a sense of guilt. We have been brought up in the Christian tradition. There's no question about it, we know what is right and we know what is wrong. Somewhere along the line we forgot to subscribe to the fact that we're very, very human. Somewhere along the line, in our earnest desire to become good, we failed to accept the fact that every single one of us is a sinner, that there is none of us who's righteous -- no, not one. So we've committed our sinning, and now we're guilt-ridden....

-- guilt-ridden because we know how we've disappointed

other people

-- guilt-ridden because we know how we've disappointed ourselves....

We really didn't want to do it -- we thoroughly enjoyed it while we did, but we really didn't want to. And it's been done.

Would you believe me if I were to tell you that I'm convinced that the greater concern here may not lie in the sin that's been committed as in the burden of guilt that we carry around. That's what does some of us in. The thing that we shouldn't have done -- that's over. But we carry the guilt and we continue to be depressed -- depressed for the simple reason that some of us have this high estimate of ourselves. We'd always have that halo over our heads....we flap our wings -- proudly -- but then we sin.....and we carry the burden of guilt.

What have I been doing for twenty-five years as I have come to this sacred desk? What have I been doing? If you don't know now, it's high time you found out. I have been trying to tell you that God loves you - - I've been trying to tell you that God loves you as you are! -- the person that you happen to be right now! One of the greatest verses in the Bible is

"While we were yet sinners God was in
Christ, reconciling the world to
himself."

This is one reason why some of us are depressed -- we fail to accept the fact that we are as we are. We fail to accept the fact that other people are as they are! We want them to have an untarnished halo, we don't want them to have feet of clay. But they do! And so do we.

As I read the New Testament as though I had never read it before I am absolutely thrilled to high heaven when I come upon a verse such as this:

"Then drew near unto him all the publicans
and sinners to hear him . . ."

...they were drawn to Jesus Christ as though He were a mighty magnet, for the simple reason that He accepted them just as they were. Maybe you and I could find ourselves free from a measure of depression if we could possibly remind ourselves that as a good parent may hate the kind of thing that his child may do because it is wrong -- nonetheless the fact remains that the parent still loves the child. And God is like that.

What has helped me in my depression? -- would you be interested in knowing? I'm numbered among the fortunate ones. For the greater part of the time I have been able to find out just what it is that's caused me to be depressed. And then I've reminded myself that I am a child of God, and that God has a purpose for my life, and that purpose in my life is yet to be fulfilled.....and that it can't be fulfilled if I remain in the depths of despair.

I have also reminded myself that there are some things that I cannot do for myself. I constantly remind myself that I am a dependent creature, and again and again I throw myself on the mercy of God -- not for any merit of my own, but because He happens to be the kind of God that He is.

Now having said all of that, I should also tell you that I am convinced that for the Christian there is always the possibility of dealing with depression creatively. Said the Apostle Paul, "I know that all things can work together for good to those who love the Lord." My depression has brought me closer to some of you. And when I have been depressed I think it served me to better minister to you as a pastor. It has served its purpose, as I've tried to remember that I throw myself upon the mercy of God.

One also needs to remind himself that Sir Walter Scott mastered depression by not allowing it to take its grip on him. Now that's something to think about. Let me read it for you as I found it last night:

"I think of the manhood and the courage that were brought out in the life of Sir Walter Scott but what seemed in the eyes of the world to be defeat and failure. Sir Walter Scott had built Abbotsford and was about to retire as a country gentleman when he found himself involved in bankruptcy to the tune of 100,000 pounds -- more than a quarter-of-a-million dollars -- through the indiscretion of his partners in business, the Ballantynes. Now that terrible blow which would have knocked any ordinary man down only brought out the very finest and the best in the life of Sir Walter Scott.

" When the news reached him, he wrote in his diary:
'I feel neither dishonor nor broken down by the news
which I have received.'

Realistically he said to himself, 'Today I walked
for the last time in this domain . . . '

(in which he had planned to spend the
rest of his life as a country gentleman)

'today I will eat in these halls of splendor for the
last time - - but - - death would have taken them
away from me, if misfortune had been spared me. I
shall look upon this discouragement as a tonic and
a bracer.'

And from that moment he devoted his energies to writing
The Waverly Novels -- some of his finest works."

.....a brave thing to suggest.

Maybe you're not made of the stuff of Sir Walter Scott . . . but maybe you
could be, especially when you think of the alternative.

* * * * *

"NOW ABOUT FEAR - - "

THE WORLD, OR GOD, is too much with us.
There is pressure, there is pain, there
is trial, there is strain. For a little
while within these hallowed walls enable
us to hush our minds and quiet our souls,
that we may give some measure of undivided
attention to the preaching and teaching
of your Word, that once more the Christian
perspective could be re-introduced.
Through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord,
Who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

AK Rev 4:40

Last Lord's Day I spoke to you about Depression. Today I want to talk to you
about "FEAR" -- a universal passion. . . .

- - Psychologists tell us that there may be some people who seem
to be incapable of loving -- they just can't be generous
and gracious and kind and soft-hearted. Strange as it
may seem, perhaps there is that kind of person who is
incapable of showing love....
- - Then they tell us that there is that kind of person who is
incapable of showing hatred -- now there's a happy thought --
no matter how he may be vexed or irritated, he will not
respond with hostility. It's just not possible for him
to do that.....

Whether these both can be established clearly in your minds, the lack of hate,
the lack of love - - perhaps we can accept the notion, however, that every single
one of us can be afraid.

Occasionally when I engage people in conversation, folks that I'm meeting for
the first time, I find myself asking the question: "Have you ever been afraid?"
I have yet to meet a person who says "Never." The answer usually comes like this:

"Lots of times!" -- or -- "Of course!" -- or -- "Who isn't?" -- or -- "I remember when . . . " -- and then goes the recital of a very great encounter in which he responded with fear and trembling. Fear is the universal passion. It doesn't escape any of us, whatever our age. Did I not learn -- I told you this before, didn't I, when I took that course years ago in "Childhood and Adolescent Psychology" -- that every child is born in this world with at least two basic fears -- the fear of a loud noise

...that's why invariably some of us talk softly when we're in the presence of children -- we don't want to startle them...

...and why, when we hold an infant, we support him from the bottom up, nestling him close to us, to give that measure of assurance and security because of the fear of falling....

But if we're born with two basic fears, look at all the other fears we acquire and sometimes it seems to be, strange as this is, that the older we become the more fears with which we have to deal. Man is by nature a fearful person, and it doesn't escape anyone, let me say it again, no matter what our age.

For the first time in history, they tell us, as far as the Western world is concerned, we have a generation of young people on our hands who are afraid -- ever since we had the atom bomb -- afraid that they might not be able to live out their years normally. Think of the fears we have now, with the energy crunch....think of the fears we have now that we said we never would have to deal with: pollution, and the crippling influence of environment factors that are so formidable.

The older some people become the more they have to deal with the fear of insecurity -- not only economic insecurity, but when they used to check out those charts when they went for a physical examination -- a measure of satisfaction in knowing all the things they didn't have.....and now at my age I fear the possibility of all the things that I didn't have that I could yet get! These are the fears some of us have, and we can't ignore them. Man remains a fearful creature.

But in the prayer that was offered as this sermon was about to begin, we used that very proper expression: 'the Christian perspective.' Is there a Christian perspective in dealing with fear, granted that man is by nature a fearful person? Can our fears be assuaged? Can we handle them? I'm not talking now about the kind of fears that serve a useful purpose, the kind of fear we inculcate into a person when he's growing up, that there are certain things he ought not to do because of the penalty that most certainly will come!...or when a child is taught to stay away from a hot stove...or when a child is taught to fear the reckless crossing of a street - - I'm not talking about that kind of fear. I'm talking about the kind of fear that remains the great crippler.

And all of this is triggered by a particular passage of Scripture. You'll find it in the 4th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, and the text is the 40th verse in that 4th chapter: two questions raised by Jesus Christ. He and His disciples were on the Sea of Galilee. Everything seemed to be going well, so well that Jesus fell asleep. Then suddenly there comes a storm...the disciples are panic-stricken, possessed by fear...they awaken Jesus -- they allow Him to see in no uncertain manner what their predicament is, and what their situation is. But they are more concerned with their situation.

But Jesus Christ is always first dealing with our predicament, and He handles it, as you might know, magnificently. He raised two questions as He responded to their plea, and the second question being an answer to the first question:

"Why are you so fearful?"

"Why do you have so little faith?"

The two go together.

Have you ever answered for yourself the question: What is the opposite of faith? The opposite of faith is not unfaith. The opposite of faith is fear. Faith is to trust, to believe, to respond. Fear is unwillingness on our part to

trust, to respond to another, or to a force, or to a fact.

Let me suggest to you a rather strange thing that you may not have thought about before: whatever you are at 10:00 in the morning, whatever you are at 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon, it could well be that you could be that, if not moreso, at 11:00 o'clock at night when you go to bed. For you drag along behind you in the course of the day and the early evening your manner and your mood. If I have been fearful during the day I will go to bed at night a fearful person. If I have run my course during the day trusting and responding to all the goodness that's been let loose in the world by the hand of God, I will lie down to sleep peacefully.

To let you know that this can be thought by good authority, let me read for you the words by H. G. Wells, who speaks to this very situation:

"As night goes around the earth,"

says H. G. Wells,

"always there are hundreds of thousands of people who should be sleeping. They are lying awake in their beds. They are fearing a competition, they are dreading the fact that what they might be able to do will not be good enough; they are ill of some illness they cannot comprehend; they are distressed by some irrational quarrels; they are maddened by some thwarted instinct or by some suppressed and thwarted desire."

And I know full well whereof he speaks, for as I confessed to you last Sunday, I too have known depression, I too have known great fear.

If this is a moment for confession, let me share it with you now: Never have I come to this sacred desk without being afraid! -- afraid that I might fail my God who has called me to be His spokesman, afraid that I might not speak with Christian conviction to your needs. I do not recall any time that I have ever casually come to this sacred desk to interpret for you the precious Word of God, lest I be fearful that I would fail the responsibility given to me. And I too have tossed and turned at night -- ask Winifred -- and out of respect for her, as softly and as quietly as I could get out of the bedroom and go down to my study on the lower

level, where I would wrestle and struggle -- fearful of any particular problem that I would have to deal with that day, and the opportunity has come and gone! -- the things that I should have said that I didn't! -- the things that I said that I should not have said -- the opportunities that I had to introduce the God-factor in my relationship with you.....and I did not. These things I have taken with me to bed at night, and I have suffered and tossed and turned, plagued by fear that I have failed. Do you understand what I am saying?

Man is by nature a fearful person. Who hasn't known fear? The person isn't fit to live who at times has not been afraid. But we're dealing with this now from the Christian perspective. Can there be some token of reassurance given to us?

In the first parish that I was privileged to serve there was Pete Renninger, a delightful chap who had two charming daughters. Winifred and I knew them when they were very, very young. We were given to understand that they were scared stiff when there would be an electrical storm....

...Pete was a good father and a wise father -- what would he do? When the storm came at night and he happened to be in the house, would he send them up to their beds and say, "Now put the covers over your heads and pretend it isn't there -- don't be afraid!"? No. Not at all.

...He would walk into their room, scared as the youngsters were, he'd reach with one arm for one of the girls...then he'd reach for the other girl with the other arm, and he'd take them, with all the confidence in the world, to the window...they'd kneel, the three of them, they'd look out, and he'd say, "Look! -- listen! -- look!-- listen! -- look! -- see! -- don't be afraid!"

Is it possible that somewhere along the line the reassuring voice of someone else can constantly come to us?

When we moved to Silver Spring we lived in that idyllic setting down there on Manchester Road -- at the top of our hill, as we said, with Mary and Wallie Davies.

They had two daughters. And I remember how we would visit there and solve all the problems in the world in our conversations at night. And then Mary came one time from Sara's room...Sara was afraid of the dark. Mary had said to her: "Just close your eyes. God's everywhere, God's in this room, He's watching over you." And Sara said, in all her innocence, "But I'd much rather have you put your arms around me and kiss me goodnight." Human as we are, is there ever any possibility of assurance that will speak to the frailty of our nature when we're ridden by fear?

I am in duty bound to remind you that again and ever so often in Scripture you find these words spoken by God, or His agents: "Fear not!" -- that's God's word to us. You don't have to be afraid. When the announcement was made of the birth of Jesus Christ: "Fear not, for what's going to happen is going to be good!"

...when the fear-stricken disciples came to the Resurrection Garden:

"Fear not! -- He's not here! -- He's ahead of you --

It's all right!"

...when our Blessed Lord had spent three perfectly wonderful years with a group of wonderful people, He realized how fear would possess them when He would be no longer here. Quietly and calmly He called them to His side, and what did He say?

"Let not your heart be troubled - - don't be afraid!"

I am echoing for you, my friend, none other than the voice of God. And all of us are as His children, and there comes a time when we simply have to take Him at His word. And that's exactly what faith is. And that's the Christian answer to fear: to have faith.

When I find myself beset by the problems of this parish, and I have no right to receive your trust as your Senior Pastor if I am not willing to assume the burdens that go with leadership, I must remind myself, however, that they're God's problems, and God wants to handle them. He never intended me to fully carry them all by myself.

And that's part of the problem for some of us. Wittingly or unwittingly, we

take on the role of God, as though everything completely depended upon us. And because of our inability, our lack of capacity, we're crippled by fear, knowing full well that we cannot pull it off all by ourselves!

I say it to you not facetiously -- you may smile if you wish....there was that preacher, a great and stalwart soul, who tossed and turned at night, only to hear a voice from Heaven, the very voice of God, saying to him, "Go to sleep! -- I'll stay up the rest of the night! I'll handle this for you." Doesn't even the Psalmist remind us of this? "He watching over Israel slumbers not, nor sleeps." -- divine insomnia, if you please - - a God who never sleeps because of His concern to take away our fears.

We have our fears -- of all that could happen, of all that has happened. Victor Hugo had his trilogy of fears as he surveyed the human scene. He observed man's fear of nature, and Victor Hugo wrote Terrors of The Sea.....he observed our fear of one another, man's fear in society, and he wrote Les Miserables.....he recognized man's fear of God, and he wrote his Notre Dame de Paris. You have your trilogy of fears, I have my trilogy of fears -- fear of the past, fear of the present, fear of the future. "Said the sparrow to the robin, I should like to know
Why these human beings rush about and worry so."
Said the robin to the sparrow, "That I cannot say,
that I do not know;
Lest they have no Heavenly Father such as cares for you and me."

The Christian perspective, the Christian answer to fear is faith.

Why is it so difficult? When I have trouble with my car, I take it to my mechanic, and sometimes I've had to take it to a garage where a mechanic worked on it that I never got to see. When the car was returned to me, I turned the ignition key and I drove away - - in fear? No. In faith. I trusted the mechanic, a man I had not seen. And all those people on the other side of the traffic lane, as I drove down the road, in front of me or behind me -- they drove with a measure of trust, that I had brakes in good mechanical order. If I can trust a mechanic, a human being that I have never seen, why do I have so much trouble trusting a Heavenly Father, whose

goodness and grace remains forever?

I want to close what I am saying to you now by reminding you that when we're overcome by fear we're constantly crippled. It was the time of the Great Plague in Asia Minor. In Constantinople, no less, a man was riding down the road in his ox-and-cart, and he stopped to pick up a woman, a hooded creature. He looked at her as she got in the cart, and he screamed, "Get off! I'll have nothing to do with you!" -- because she personified, she was the symbol of the dreaded cholera. The plague had come to Asia Minor and had killed thousands upon thousands of people.

....he immediately recognized her and said, "You are the dread cholera!" She said, "Let me ride with you into Constantinople."

He reached for his dagger, about to kill her. She stayed his hand. She said, "Take me to Constantinople -- I will keep my word. If there are people who will die of the plague and of cholera in Constantinople, I give you my word, of all the people who will die, perhaps only five will die because of me. Believe me!"

....he succumbed to her wish. She got on the cart, they drove to Constantinople.

Within a matter of time he saw her again. Thousands had died in Constantinople. He raised his dagger - - she stayed his hand. She said, "I kept my word -- only five died of cholera.....all the others died out of fear."

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Psalm 27:13

First, let me tell you a bit about my friend Maurice Tenenbaum. It was a number of years ago, we were riding together on the Orient Express. About two o'clock in the morning he came to my compartment, and he said, "Will you go with me?" I did not go.

Some time later when we were re-united in Warsaw, he told me where he had gone at two o'clock in the morning, he told me what he had seen. He'd gotten off the train, he had made arrangements to visit what had been a concentration camp. He told me what he had seen, later confirmed by the official films that I observed from the War Crimes Trials at Nurenberg - - the skeletal remains of people for whom Adolph Hitler had no use whatsoever.....vats in which human bodies had been boiled.....cakes of soap made from human flesh.....

My friend Maurice said to me: "Shaheen, what could those people have believed that they would do such a thing?"

Maurice was absolutely right - - it was because of what they believed that they did what they did. For a man's fundamental beliefs are always the operative dynamic force in his life.

I come now to this sacred desk to ask you a question: What is it that you fundamentally believe?

. . . is it possible for you to phrase into one sentence,
perhaps, what you believe about life? what you believe
about the present? What you believe about the future?
What you believe about yourself?

I can only tell it to you as I read it - ^a a little time ago I talked with

a man who is a trustee of one of the greatest universities in this nation. He had been intimately associated with the development of atomic energy. After discoursing for a little while on the destructive energies now put into the hands of men, he said, 'As I review the history of the human race for the past 6,000 years, I can see no hope that man will deal any more wisely with this problem than he has with those that have arisen in the past. I cannot see even a gleam of light on the horizon so far as the survival of the human race is concerned.' This brilliant man fairly dripped with pessimism, as you will quickly conclude. He was thoroughly depressed."

...the man who wrote these words said, "I know why his morale was so low, why he was so hopeless, why his heart failed him for fear, and so I said to him, 'In your review of the possibilities of the future you have left out the most important fact of all: God. I cannot believe that the God who created man in His own image and likeness, endowing him with power, not only to unlock the secrets of the universe, but to hold fellowship with his Creator, will now abandon man to self-destruct.'" ...said the man who wrote these words, "My friend shook his head sadly and said, 'I wish I had that much faith.'"

He might just as well have said, "There is nothing that he can sing about." And that could be your situation as well.

For it's not only the world about us of which we are part that seems to be crushing in. Some of you right here this morning, sad to admit -- your own personal world could be crushing in on you, and you might not be able to see any light at all at the end of the tunnel....and you too could say, "I wish I had that much faith" - - - you too might be able to say, "I wish I had something to sing about."

Honestly now, when do we sing? We sing when we're possessed by hope, we sing when we know that we are possessed by love. Show me a teenager who has

suddenly become aware of her, and she's aware of attention being paid to her, and I'll show you a boy with a whistle on his lips, and a light in his eyes and a song in his heart. We're able to sing when we can face the future without fear, when we're confident that no good thing will ever fail us. When we don't have that confidence, who then can sing?

The text for this brief meditation are those absolutely wonderful words of the Psalmist: "I had fainted unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." - - my heart would have gone out of me if I could not believe that God is still good. This gentleman to whom we referred as the sermon began could not honestly believe that God was still in control. He could not believe.

It was a Sunday School teacher who gave her youngsters an interesting exercise as she went to the chalk board and wrote two words, and then she said, "Will some one of you in the class go and finish this sentence -- complete it." There was a subject and there was a verb. The two words were:

GOD IS _____

What do you suppose a youngster did? With the wisdom perhaps that surpasses some of ours, that youngster went to the chalk board and simply put a period, he ended the sentence. As far as he was concerned, it was complete! Nothing more to be said -- GOD IS. Which is simply to suggest, He's all around - - He's not someone who was . . . He's not someone for whom we have yet to wait in order to appear. He is a present reality, and He's in charge.

"I had fainted unless I could believe this - - "

is what the Psalmist is saying. But of all the people on the face of the earth, we Christians are the most fortunate, dare I say that boldly and broadly when it comes to believing in God? - - for we Christians not only believe in God, that God is, but we believe Him to be the kind of God that He is, a God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, a God for whom we can have the sublimest of all definitions: God is love. When one is being loved, he always has something to sing about.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was one of the greatest of all English preachers in recent centuries. Would you believe me if I were to tell you how it happened. Very unwillingly, most reluctantly, he went to church one Sunday morning, only to find himself the only person in that village church aside from the well-meaning lay reader who was asked to conduct the service. Very awkwardly the lay reader began, even though he only had one person present . . . he was rather uncomfortable with a congregation that small. We have it on good authority he stumbled through the service, and when it came time to preach he almost became tongue-tied....

....he found himself rather awkwardly saying, "You! --

You, fellow -- you back there! You know what? -- God loves

you! - - God loves you!"

When the service was all over Charles Haddon Spurgeon went out and felt for the first time in his life that he really had something to sing about.

"I had fainted unless I had believed to see the goodness of

God in the land of the living . . . "

...today.....now. Not in some future hour -- to believe that God is good, and to believe that God loves me.

When you and I begin to suffer despair -- and who hasn't? -- one needs to remember that no man is hopeless who has a friend.....and no man is useless who is one.

I need to share this with you, and I am sure she wouldn't mind.....I have known her ever since I became the pastor of this congregation, she was a teenager back in 1956. She's had one struggle after another, and how she makes it -- only by the faith that she has in God. Any number of other people would have been defeated a long time ago. And I'm not so certain that, physically speaking, the future augurs well for her.....

" . . . I just had to write and tell you how comforting and inspiring the poem 'The Power of Prayer' on the back of the

MESSENGER was for me. It is going into the family Bible as a reminder to me to pray for others, and for a reminder that God has answered my prayers in many ways . . "

She says, "I am changing, I hope for the better. I have my set-backs, as is true for all of us. What I have been doing lately is to re-evaluate my priorities . . . "

...and then she indicates what's happening now, since she's re-assessing her priorities, what really now is important for her -- that's what she's asking herself... and with her limited measure of health -- do you know how she concludes - - "I am helping a friend - - "

(Mark you now, she has depleted energy)

" . . . I am helping a friend whenever possible in an apartment. She had her bladder removed and I make up the bags the nurses need to put on her stomach, and if her bags leak, I wrap her in towels, then I call for the nurse, and then I help her with her meals. I met her fifteen years ago. I also help a cerebral palsied lady on the 12th floor . . . "

...and unashamedly this is the way she concludes:

" . . . I don't mean to brag or sound boastful, but these things have made me happy, and I have something to sing about . . . "

When there is the possibility that your personal world could be tumbling in on you...when there is the realization that that could have happened because of something that you might have done, one's heart is renewed by the precious recollection that God still loves us, and because He loves us, we are in duty bound to return our love for Him in re-investing our lives meeting the needs

of other people. I have been given this good advice: when I should begin to feel sorry for myself, then you go out and remember that God gives you life, in order to love and serve other people. And that's enough to make a person rejoice.

But the cloud that descends upon all of us, of course, is the cloud of depression in the realization that we are sinners. Nothing is more depressing than that. In the final analysis the bottom line remains: we are all unprofitable servants. None of us will ever get a passing grade as far as life is concerned, we'll never be that good. In the face of all that, is there still something to sing about?

A poet after World War I wrote these words: "Though we forget you (meaning God) You will not forget us. We feel so sure that You will not forget us. But stay with us until the dream is passed. So we ask for courage, strength and pardon. Especially, I think, we ask for pardon, and that you'll stand beside us to the very last."

Augustine, one of the greatest of the early Church Fathers, was a rascal if ever there was a rascal. In the early years of his life he committed every sin, perhaps, known to the mind of man, and if he didn't commit it he thought about doing it. And there was always this struggle of wanting to be good....and yet the force of evil was quite strong. He would get himself to the point where he would pray, "Dear God, make me good - - " . . . but he was honest enough to add softly, " . . . but not tonight!" But then the conversion set in. When he was dying, do you know what his final request was, to a friend of his: "Write so I can read it until I breathe my last, on the wall opposite my bed: 'Blessed is he whose sin is forgiven.'"

Now that's the kind of God that we have in Jesus Christ, who is faithful to the end, who when the dying man asks for pardon, the response is sure and certain -- "I forgive you." And that's something worth singing about!

* * *

"LIKE SEEDS WELL DROPPED"
(Mark 4: 26-29)

WE MAKE so little time, O God, to give some measure of undivided attention to the preaching of Your Word. Grant that we should make the most of this opportunity, give us the blessing of Your Holy Spirit. Through Jesus Christ Thy Son, our Lord, Who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

Mark 4, 26-29

The sermon on this Sunday in which we celebrate the Festival of the Harvest has as its text these verses from the 4th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark:

"And Jesus said, So is the Kingdom of God as if a man should cast seed upon the earth and should sleep and rise, night and day, and the seed should spring up and grow, he does not know how. The earth beareth fruit of herself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear."

In company with some of you I have my moments when I phantacize a bit and think myself in complete charge of things -- so much so that I could order the way people live and the way they plan their lives. As an example, I have this phantasy that I could be driving along the beltway and press a magic button, and every driver would stay completely within his own lane!

...I have this phantasy where on occasion it would be within my power to keep people separated a bit from this congestion that becomes us in the metropolitan area, where everybody would have his own acre of ground and live in a very spacious setting, with enough people, of course, to help maintain it....

I have this phantasy -- if I had it within my power, I would require every single household to have its own garden plot, because I am absolutely convinced that there are certain lessons that tending a garden can teach us, that we might not otherwise master or learn.

Today as we celebrate the Festival of the Harvest, the church does well to include it in its schedule. For two reasons, I dare say! We need to be reminded

that it is by God's bounty that we are sustained, that God provides for our physical needs, that whenever you think of something spread on a table before you, you might think in terms of the hand of God.

It's not easy these days when you go to eat, to think of God. Who thinks of God when you go to a supermarket and reach for a loaf of bread that's attractively packaged and sliced? -- a far cry from the other day when the man tilled the field, harvested the wheat, took the grain to the mill, brought the grain back as flour -- put it in the flour bin in the pantry....and his wife would bake bread -- in much the same tradition as the ancient French peasant, whose wife would never bake bread without making upon the loaf the sign of the Cross -- as a reminder of God's good gift, the most perfect of all gifts.

It's a far cry from that day like in the small town in which I grew up, where practically every household had its own garden plot, and when the meal was being served, Mrs. Bennett had gone out and picked the limas, and the pole beans, she had snapped them, she had gotten them ready for the meal....the corn, the peas, the tomatoes, the carrots, the lettuce -- all from their own garden -- and having tilled that garden, and having watered that garden, and having waited for the plants to bear their fruit. There was more of a chance to think in terms of God when that meal was prepared and consumed.

So the Church maintains today, as it includes in its schedule the Festival of the Harvest, we ought not to forget, it is by the hand of the Lord that our needs are met.

There's a second lesson that comes to us as we observe the harvest. Of all the lessons that nature teaches us, none perhaps is greater than the lesson of patience. The harvest does not come overnight, an acorn does not become an oak overnight. It was one of the lessons that God was trying to teach the Children of Israel when He brought them up out of Egypt and headed them toward the Promised Land, He said, "You will get the early and the late rain" . . . but they were given to understand that that early and late rain would come according to God's schedule,

according to God's good pleasure. They would have to wait until it came....just as in recent time we've been waiting for the rain to come.

Our Blessed Lord, when He was here on earth, had one parable after another that dealt with the theme of nature. He would talk about seeds quite frequently. The most popular of all of His parables as far as nature is concerned, I dare say, could be the parable of the Seed, the Sower and the Soil.

The other evening we were looking at some of those full-color slides that constitute precious memories for us of our different pilgrimages to the Holy Land. I draw your attention now to one in particular, if you were to see those slides now - - it is the outstretched hand of my secretary of many years, Alice Jean Lynch, plucking seeds from a mustard tree in order to bring them back and replenish the diminishing supply of John Troxler, who had made the pilgrimage earlier. If you were to go by 117 Normandy Drive today, you'd see what John Troxler has done with those seeds -- a seed, mark you, scarcely discernible to the naked eye, has now produced a tree, 7, 8, 9 feet in height. But it did not happen overnight. And part of the truth that we need to remember is that within the seed is the dynamic, the potential of energy, once it germinates, comes to fruition . . it takes time.

Of all the lessons that nature teaches us, perhaps patience is foremost. And one day maybe in the years to come when you and I look back over the years we've lived, it could be that what some of us may say most - - If only I had been a bit more patient! Impatience, I would say, for many of us is a very crippling thing. I am by nature not a very patient person -- as some of you well know.

I had a school teacher, I presume, who insisted that when I was young, and so she gave us an exercise -- it included other members of the class as well . . . when there was still snow on the ground, she gave us an assignment: "I am going to give you a package of seeds. You make your own hot-bed-of-sorts. And then I want you to determine for yourself, as you keep a chart, the progress of growth -- measure it." I got a cigar box, that was my hot-bed....put the soil in it...she gave me a

package of celery seed....I put the seed in there and then the next day I came with a ruler. I expected to have something measureable overnight! It didn't happen. But again and again let me say to you -- an acorn does not become an oak overnight!

We are by nature impatient, many of us. No matter where you look, you see the evidence of our impatience. It's one of the problems that we have between the East and the West. When I went out to India on that special assignment I remember a man saying to me, "The ground of the East is covered with the graves of the man from the West who tried to hurry the East."

In our international relations, we fail to appreciate at times the differences in culture, in ideology, we who are so activististic in the West, and in this country in particular, want immediate solutions. It requires patience.

Now as this sermon is meant to move along quickly, let me suggest to you three areas of our impatience.....

-- many of us are impatient with God. That's our problem of unanswered prayer -- we're arrogant enough to believe that God ought to answer our prayers sooner than He does, and if you please, precisely not only according to our time table, but according to our strategy and according to our pattern. God deals with eternity -- God has something more on His mind than the present moment. God has something more on His mind than you, or me, as an example. God deals with the totality of the scene.

When I went to Liverpool and saw two of the cathedrals there, I was reminded of the woman who came and criticized one of those cathedrals.....and her husband, who was a very wise person, said, "But my dear, don't you suppose the architect took all of those things into consideration?" God is the supreme Architect of the Universe and we can well afford to trust Him as He's seen the totality of the picture. But you and I become impatient with God.

-- you and I become impatient with one another. This is the trouble in

many a household -- the wife is impatient with the husband, the husband is impatient with the wife, and the parents together are impatient with the children - - why can't they grow up wiser and better than they are? . . . and the youngsters are impatient with the parents - - why do they have to grow old over such a long period of time?

It's a crippling thing in our interpersonal relationships that we are as impatient as we are.

Rosemarie Rhyne, one of the three installed as a staff member today, warmed the cockles of my heart and I had no question as to her capability to perform her role, particularly in counseling ministry and ministry to persons with special needs, because she has on her desk a slogan:

BE PATIENT WITH ME - - GOD ISN'T
FINISHED WITH ME YET

....and that's the story of every one of us! Life is a constant school room in which all of us are learning. And the critical aspect about life is this: that it remains a learning situation until we breathe our last. None of us ever fully arrives . . . none of us ever fully has it made. We're in the process.

When the day should come that I should no longer be your pastor, I know exactly what I would want to say to you: I want to thank you for the way you've dealt patiently with me in whatever time I've spent with you. For this I am profoundly grateful. This is the measure of Christian compassion as we deal with people. We need to be patient not only with God....we need to be patient with one anotherbut with all the strength that I can command, we need to be patient with ourselves.

I know the trauma that comes when you look back over a certain period in your life and you would to God that you had done things differently! But no man ought to allow his life to be crippled by regret, because the demands of the present moment have to be met and allowing yourself to indulge in remorse and regret can

make you ineffective for the present moment. But some of us are very impatient with ourselves.

Really now -- and keep this in mind, won't you -- down deep inside our hearts, would to God we could be better than we are . . . would to God we wouldn't fun out of love as often as we do. Nature teaches us the necessity for patience. Again and again, let me say it to you in a ringing fashion: the acorn does not become an oak overnight. And why are saints saints? -- because they have been caught up in that becoming process as they've waited on the Lord to renew their strength.

When you and I pray for pardon, what is it we're really asking God to do for us? We're asking that He not be reckless in His wrath and condemn us quickly to Hell. We're asking God to take His time, to think it over. We're asking God to read the fine print in our lives -- patiently. And that's one reason why some of us aren't afraid to face what is yet to come -- even the Day of Judgment.

....because we'll go on believing that the God
who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a God
of endless patience. And therein lies our hope.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"NOTHING EVER STAYS WON"

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

John 8:31-32

Indulge me for a moment, please, as I wax nostalgic and think of the days when Winifred and I began housekeeping as we lived in our first parsonage. It was built at the turn of the century -- I dare say you would have liked it very, very much. It was the kind of a home that made for both graceful and gracious living. It had five bedrooms, it had a large hall, it had a living room as well as a parlor. And in those days, as one wit observed -- the parlor was reserved only for perhaps when a funeral was being conducted in the house, or a visit from the preacher, or some equally painful occasion.....

The thing that I especially remember about that house was the porch, on two sides, and it had, as you might suppose, a bannister, or a railing. It was painted white.

The time came when David came along, our first-born, and we decided to put up a little picket fence in the back yard. Now I remember when we painted that fence we painted it white, and we soon discovered that it didn't stay white -- again and again we either scrubbed it or had it re-painted. Listen carefully: it never stayed as fresh as the day we put the paint brush aside, or the scrub brush aside. Again and again attention had to be paid to it.

By the same token, as I come to this sacred desk this morning I am in duty bound to remind you that that's the way it is with almost anything worthwhile -- nothing ever stays won. Attention must be constantly paid to it. There must be, if you please, a constant renewal.

On this day that marks the Reformation of the Church, we too are in duty bound to say to ourselves, even my commitment to Jesus Christ may not stay as

fresh as it once was. I must take time to give it more than ordinary attention, that it might be renewed and re-freshened. This is one of the purposes to be served as we include in the calendar of the church a day such as this, that marks the Reformation of the Church. For even the Church of Jesus Christ, as history sadly records, can run the risk of corruption. Again and again and again a basic word in your vocabulary must be reformation, which is equivalent to renewal.

In 1972 the Lutheran Church in America in Convention assembled in Dallas spent practically all of its time, much to my dismay, in re-structuring itself, spending thousands upon thousands of dollars and taking time after time to study and to deliberate, and then to end by simply re-structuring, re-shuffling agencies, boards and commissions.....to what end? The wisest thing that came out of that convention in my book were the words of Paul C. Empie, now of blessed memory, when he addressed the convention and said, "Re-structuring is not to be made the equivalent of renewal. Re-structuring can never be the same as renewal. You use the same people, you're called upon to do the same work. But if the work is not done by renewed people, all of our re-structuring is in vain.

That's why I, across the years in my ministry, have had little enthusiasm for trying to re-structure things. But by the grace of God I have had an abiding passion to constantly remind people that they need to be renewed in the faith.

As I come to this sacred desk this morning I think you and I have to ask ourselves: where are we in our Christian growth and our commitment? Where are we, at what stage, in our Christian pilgrimage? How frequently do we take time to ask ourselves: How much of a fervent follower of Jesus Christ am I? -- and the word to be underlined there is fervent, for the fire can begin to flicker, you know. How fervent am I in my devotion to Jesus Christ?

In the Gospel lesson which Cmdr. Lovell read for us so well, you have evidence of an augument going on between Jesus Christ and some people. Some of those people were very hostile to Jesus Christ. Fortunately some were friendly. And to

them He turned and spoke these words, which constitute the text for today's sermon. You'll find them recorded as the 31st and 32nd verses in the 8th chapter of John:

"Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed in him, If you continue in my word, then are you my disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

Now, how much of a disciple are you, my friend? -- I ask myself that question repeatedly -- and do I find myself within the true church of Jesus Christ? This is the day when we ask that question: What is the true Church, and am I to be found within it?

I don't know how you'll react to what I am about to read to you. I'll give you the quotations directly -- one from John Wesley, the founder, so-called, of Methodism, a devout member of the Church of England at one time. But then he became a born-again Christian and felt that while people were not coming to the church, he would have to take the church to them. And he went up and down England, preaching to people wherever he would find them.

....once a friend of his came and said, "Do you know that a relative of yours is going to become a Roman Catholic?" He waited for John Wesley's reaction. John Wesley reacted in this manner, by simply saying, "One can be saved in any church; one can be damned in any church."

He was in good company because Augustine, one of the great early church fathers, is supposed to have said, and I quote him:

"Many that the Church has on her rolls God does not have on His rolls.....and many whom God has on His rolls, the Church does not have on her rolls."

....how can one be certain?

Yesterday I received that long distance call -- a friend of many years was translated into God's nearer presence. Instinctively, when I got the news I dialed the new widow. What could I say to her? -- once their pastor, forever

their friend and brother in Christ. Without any hesitation I could say to her, "We knew the One in whom he believed, and even though cancer took its dreadful toll, his faith did not waver. We can be assured that he's been translated into God's nearer presence."

One doesn't have to come to the brink of death to have that kind of assurance. With all the strength that my soul can command I say to you right now -- with whatever zest that you have for life, you can have that assurance now, that you're numbered in the ranks of the redeemed, that you belong to the true Church of Jesus Christ.

How can you be sure? A good question, really. But you ought to be able to be certain. Let me suggest to you now that you think in terms of four words, and as you think of those four words you might be assured and re-assured, as well you ought to be....

- - for when I think of the Church of Jesus Christ, I think first of the verb called. Every single person who finds himself within the company of believers is a person who has been called by the Holy Spirit. You may never have put it that way in your own thinking. But none of us finds himself within the Christian church only because of his willful decision, important as that may be. Martin Luther is absolutely right in his Explanation of the Third Article of the Creed, that it's the Holy Spirit that enlightens us, and gathers us together. You are inside the Christian family if you can see yourself responding to God's call. And by the same token, if you remain outside the Christian family, it can be said that you're rejecting God's call to you. You begin at that point! Every single one of us ought to see himself within the Christian family as a person who has responded to God's claim, to the tug of the Holy Spirit. It's absolutely as wonderful as that.

- - the second verb that you need to keep in mind is this: you can have the assurance that you're within the true family of God when you are gathered in the Christian fellowship. I have never allowed myself to subscribe to the notion that there is such a thing as a solitary Christian. We need to grow, we need one another. And we need to be found within the company of one another. When you find yourself gathered in the company of believers, then you might be able to say to yourself with profound assurance: I am heading in the right direction. For, said Jesus Christ of His Church, "The gates of Hell will never prevail against you."
- - the third verb is this - - first called, second gathered, third: nurtured. You can have the assurance that you're within the Christian church when you find yourself being constantly fed on a spiritual diet that holds you in good stead. We need to be nurtured, we need to be sustained. You place a high value on that, don't you? Isn't that why you're here now? We're being nurtured while we're in the company of one another. To the day I die I'll thank God for what you bring to me! And when we find ourselves within a place such as this, we're being nurtured as the Word of God is being interpreted and proclaimed. We're being nurtured by Word and Sacrament. I say to you as strongly as I can, don't ever subscribe to the notion that you got enough diet in your formative years that will keep you spiritually healthy as long as you live! It's never enough! We need to be nurtured constantly by the Word of God. That, said Jesus Christ to His friends, "If you want to be sure that you're a true disciple, you've got to continue in My word...you've got to stick with it - - you've got to be steadfast." You can't really follow Jesus Christ at long-distance -- you get close to Him as

you get close to His followers. And that's an awesome thing for us to say to one another.

...called, gathered, nurtured...

Incidentally, what is your spiritual health? There are people who tell me that my physical health depends very largely upon my diet. What kind of a diet sustains you, spiritually speaking?

...called.....gathered.....nurtured.....scattered.

- - you can tell you're part of the true church by what happens once the Benediction is pronounced and you turn your back upon this place. I told you about the time when the flood came in the Susquehanna Valley. The water in the streets of Williamsport came up to the red on the traffic lights. At the corner of 3rd and Mulberry was First Presbyterian Church -- completely inundated. It took weeks and months to restore the church. But there was a clever chap who designed a sign for the bulletin board. It went something like this -- I can't give you the exact wording:

"This Building Is Temporarily Closed
While Re-construction Due To The
Flood Takes Place. But This Is Not
The Real First Presbyterian Church
in the City of Williamsport. The
Real Presbyterian Church is Scat-
tered all Over This Community Where
Our Members Live, and Where They
Work....Where They Witness Day By Day."

I get a thrill so often when I think of how when you leave you scatter in many different directions.....

- - when the church is to be found when Don Piper concerns himself about refugees in his day's work....

- - when Bus Ryan, a vice president in a corporation, concerns himself that his firm should give good and honest hospitality to the traveler in a quality situation.....

- - or when you, Al Sebastian, as an accountant, dealing with your clients in a hard and cruel business world, and inculcate

Christian principles, when the temptation is always there to fudge a bit, and to short-change even the United States Government.....

- - when a member of this congregation who is singing in the choir will walk a mile from where she lives to minister to a house-bound person.....

- - when a confirmand of twenty years reaches out as he did last night to the pastor who confirmed him, simply to be spiritually re-charged in the crisis that he has to face as he deals with somebody else.....

This is the true Church.

And you are part of it if you were called.....gathered.....nurtured.....
.....sent forth. "So shall ye be my disciples," said Jesus Christ, " . . . if

you continue in my word . . . "

....wherever you are, whatever the condition, whatever the circumstance. And that's why He gives us the Holy Spirit, that none of us is out there ever all by himself. It's the Holy Spirit that sustains us and empowers us. This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"SOMETHING HAPPY AND GLAD"

No. 1 in Series on "Stories Jesus Told"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Luke 14:15

On this Sunday in the calendar of the Church when we commemorate the lives of those who have been translated into God's nearer presence, the sermon bears the title: "SOMETHING HAPPY, SOMETHING GLAD;" and the text is the 15th verse of the 14th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"And when one of them who sat at meat with him
heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed
is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of
God."

Let me begin by asking you a question: How do you suppose our Blessed Lord spent much of His time once He turned His back upon the carpenter's shop and became an itinerant preacher? You're making a mistake, my friend, if you think He spent the greater part of His time working on sermons, or even preaching, or even praying, or even teaching -- or even recruiting disciples. While all of this is important, and while every single one of these received its due and proper attention, He also spent a significant portion of His time sitting down and eating a meal with people. He thoroughly enjoyed it. And would you believe it -- He'd initiate the invitation. Not if they wouldn't ask Him -- He saw that He was invited because it was the bottom line that meant most to Him -- not how He got the invitation, but the fact that He'd be able to sit down and break bread with people.

I who stem from Middle-Eastern stock know full well how important this kind of thing is. There are certain things occur around a supper table that can hold us in good stead as long as we live. Wise indeed was the man who said, "It really isn't the food that's important, it's the kind of fellowship, it's the conversation, it's the people with whom you break bread" -- these are the things that

really matter most.

Here in Saint Luke, we've come to place a high value upon it, of course we have. And Winifred and I -- you need to know this now -- as we complete our first quarter of a century among you, out of pure gratitude to God are hoping to invite all of you to supper sometime in the course of the year.....not all at the parsonage -- we couldn't do that -- but in limited numbers have you come here as we break bread together, gratefully and gladly.

I am convinced, as I think of it, that while in the Christian experience some good things happen when we hold our hands in prayer....some good things happen when we use our hands to lift a prayer book, or a hymn book or a Bible -- good things also happen in the name of Jesus Christ when those hands reach for a fork or a spoon. There is such a thing, properly understood, as eating and drinking to the glory of God. It was on such an occasion, another one of many, when what happens recorded in the 15th chapter of Luke, that Jesus is able to tell a story.

As He was breaking bread together, He said something about the invitation list -- when you plan to have people as your guests, said Jesus, don't simply invite those who will be in a wonderful position to return the favor -- don't you ever draw up an invitation list when you think primarily of the return engagement when you will be invited to their house. You don't invite people for that reason, said Jesus. From the Christian perspective, when you're drawing up your invitation list you invite people who might never be able to invite you to their home, for either an economic or a social reason. Well, that's what He said as He was breaking bread with those people.....and His suggestion went over like a lead balloon! . . . and created a very awkward moment, embarrassing.

And then, as you know, there's always someone, seemingly so, who's present, who tried to ease the tension and tried to divert and direct the thinking in some other direction. And so very easily, I suppose, I don't know how much credibility they gave to the idea, but very easily, almost glibly, the person

may have said, "Ah, it must be wonderful to get an invitation to break bread with the King!"

And then Jesus turned to that person with a kind of a 'well, that's what you think!' look on His face

....or to pose the question, "If you got an invitation, would you really show up? - - Do you honestly think it would be as wonderful as that?" - - - that was His retort to the person who said, 'It must be wonderful to get an invitation to have a banquet in the presence of the King'. . . . and especially when that King is none other than King Jesus!

I think I should tell you that when the sermon schedule for Saint Luke was being prepared this past summer, as we anticipate the Sundays between now and next June, it occurred to me that we do well to talk about the stories that Jesus told, and this is the first in the series. He retorted, as He dealt with that person, by telling a story.

He told the story about a feast that had been prepared, and in the Middle East that was always a grand occasion -- the great moment, perhaps, for any person when he had an invitation to go some place to a banquet, and the invitations were sent out weeks in advance....but the precise time when the meal was to be served was made known only as the food was being prepared and readied for the table. And then the servants of the master went out and said: "It's all right now, you come!"

And Jesus said, "As the servants went out, this person said, 'Excuse me, I send my regrets, I cannot come.'" Jesus said, "You'd think they'd all have shown up, but they didn't. It was to be a feast."

Now there are many facets of this parable with which one could deal, but there's only one that I invite you to consider this morning. When Jesus was talking about the Kingdom of God, invariably He would talk about it as a happy

and glad thing . . . which is in marked contrast to some people that I know when they talk about the Christian experience, when they talk about religion, when they talk about church. For some unexplainable reason to me that I've never quite been able to appreciate, many people think of the Christian experience as a depressing thing, as an unhappy thing, a price that has to be paid, something that's taken away from us rather than something wonderful that's going to be given to us.

I was thrilled this morning as the 8:30 service was about to begin as I stood out in the corridor and I saw some people coming to church, a spring in their steps, with a kind of a Praise-the-Lord! look on their faces, as though they couldn't wait to get here and to be with one another. I prize this kind of thing on your part, for this is what the Christian experience is meant to be. Jesus was always introducing it in this light. But why some people can't appreciate it that way I'm not quite certain that I know.

Let me tell you about what happened in Puritan New England -- the sad-of-face, the dour Christians.....there was a preacher who had two churches. Separated by some distance, there was a stream that connected them. He found himself in the dead of winter with a lame horse. He preached at one place in the morning, he preached at the other place in the afternoon.

.....it occurred to him because of the lame horse that he could never keep his afternoon appointment, and he had a conscience about it.

And so he thought to himself, I'll get myself a pair of skates and I'll skate down the stream, and I'll be there in time

-- something unthought-of in the Puritan world,
to skate on the Sabbath! --

....you can imagine how the deacons felt when they saw skating down the stream on the Sabbath their preacher. They took him to task immediately -- "Skating on the Sabbath you were!" -- they would have unfrocked him on the spot, but they gave him a trial immediately, asked

a number of questions as to why this had been done, this unthought-of-thing, to skate on the Sabbath, and the preacher especially!

...his fate was about to be decided, and there was one old codger, who fastened his finger like this and put it under the preacher's nose and said, "Tell me, there's one thing I need to know -- did ye enjoy the skating?" - - - as though it all hinged on that -- as though it was unbelievable that a Christian could be a happy person.

But Jesus repeatedly talked about the fact that Christians were meant to be happy! - and to find their experience a joyful thing. The hymn that we just sang -- the last stanza:

"In heaven above, in heaven above,
God has a joy prepared . . . "

...but you're wrong, my friend, if you think you have to die in order to enjoy what God has to give. The Christian faith, properly understood, invites us today to enter into the joy which God has for those who love Him and who trust Him.

The sad person in life, the one to be lamented, is the servant of Satan when the due bills come in for his sins, and the price has to be paid. But it's a joyful thing for a Christian to know that his sins are being taken away, that he can draw upon the resources of heaven -- today -- now!

Any leader who is associated with people covets for himself certain things that he'd like to see achieved. In this quarter-of-a-century that I have been privileged to share with you I have been fairly transparent, I don't keep anything from you -- you have a right to know that one of the things I continually covet for us in Saint Luke is that we might be known as a happy people, enthusiastic about being part of the Family in God.

Pastor David and I sit down every now and then and reflect upon the kind of thing that we're trying to do in Youth Ministry. It's his portfolio, along with Kim, of course it is . . . but as the Senior Pastor I have an abiding

interest in every phase of our work, and as we reflect together we know full well that what we want to do for these youngsters in their impressionable teenage period of their lives is to introduce them all over again to Jesus Christ, to better acquaint them with the Biblical truths, to inculcate in them spiritual values that will hold them in good stead as their life unfolds, and to do all of this within a framework of happiness and enthusiasm. And I am happy to tell you that when you come here on a Tuesday afternoon, when we have our well-known Supertuesday program, you'll be hard-pressed to find a sad-faced youngster. The only sad-faced youngster I think you might find may be the kid who discovered that his girl-friend didn't show up! I covet for myself as a pastor to so relate to youngsters that they might discover the joy of being a follower of Jesus Christ. And it's possible -- today -- now!

I grew up in my impressionable years when train travel was still in vogue. And I remember the story being told of a lady who got on the train, a grouchy, grumpy sort of person, sat there in a seat all by herself -- the other people thoroughly enjoying themselves as the train went from town to town. And as she constantly commiserated with herself and was grouchy, all of a sudden she heard the conductor announce the name of her destination...and as she gathered her things together she mumbled as she went to get off the train, "Had I known the trip was going to be so short I would have enjoyed it more!"

Indulge me for a moment, I'm wondering if those whom we love in Heaven above, if we could hear them speak to us now, if we wouldn't be hearing them say to us: "While God gives you every opportunity, make the most of it -- enjoy it! Live each day to the glory of God."

Did it ever occur to you how wonderful the invitation is, when God is always saying to us, in the words of this tremendous passage of Scripture --

"Come -- for all things are made ready for you!"

We even began by coming into a world with hands made ready to receive us, to love us. And the grandest picture known to the mind of man, that when he breathes his

last, there stands Jesus Christ with arms outstretched -- "Come! -- all things are made ready!" . . . which is simply to say: "Enjoy it! Enjoy it to the full."

Look at it from this angle, the Christian religion, properly understood, is not primarily something to be endured -- (I'm not forgetting that our Blessed Lord said "Take up your cross and follow me") . . . but it's not something primarily to be endured. It is something to be enjoyed -- there is a difference, and happily so.

Of course there are demands made upon us, and there are obligations to be met. But over and beyond today's discipline and denial is the joy that's meant to be experienced. I have reason to believe that you won't find a devoted follower of Jesus Christ anywhere who won't strike that note. And that's something to be glad about.

* * * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"AN INSIDE JOB"
Stories Jesus Told: Luke 13:21

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Luke 13:21

Just among us, you could be told that occasionally there is a measure of professional jealousy among preachers, so much so that somebody once said a sermon is something that a preacher will not cross the street to hear....but he'll cross the country to deliver.

I freely confess to you that I am numbered among those who are turned on by good preaching. It thrills my soul to hear someone take the Word of God and become a channel of communication by which it's made easier for me to think the thoughts of God. It doesn't necessarily mean that the preacher has to be eloquent, or gifted in style. It simply means that somewhere, somehow, when he stands up in front of me, I have reason to believe that he has something more than a second-hand acquaintance with God. I have reason to believe that God is very real to him, and that he believes what he's trying to have me believe -- and that God has called him, that God has placed his hand upon his shoulder and said, "I need you to be my mouthpiece." Whenever I find myself in the presence of such a person, whether it's across the street or across the country, I would count myself fortunate if I could sit at his feet. Good preaching does turn me on.

I should like very much to have been present when our Blessed Lord was here on earth, for He made much of preaching when He came, He came preaching. Wherever He went, He tried to give people unforgettable pictures of God by painting a word picture. And you know, as you read your Bibles, how He often went about it. He would take something with which they were familiar, and use that by which to illustrate the fundamental truths of the Kingdom of God. He always had His eyes open for something that could trigger a thought, and as it was meaningful to them He'd

take them on to something much more meaningful, where the Kingdom is concerned.

He told a number of stories. He was the prince of story-tellers. And you and I remain something of a child at heart -- no matter how old we may become, who doesn't enjoy the telling of a story, especially when the point that's meant to be made is a very apt one.

There's always a risk, of course, that as you pay attention to the story you might forget the point that's meant to be made -- and that's one reason why Jesus kept telling the stories over again sometimes, and being His own interpreter....as much as to say, "This is exactly why I told you this."

As He moved around from place to place, what was He really doing? He was telling people about the Kingdom of God -- "The Kingdom of God is like -- -- "and just like that He'd tell them a story. Sometimes the story would be very, very long, a story that consists of three different parts, as you can read for yourself in the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Sometimes the story was about a thing, or an experience. Like as not it was about a person.

This morning's text is a story that Jesus told, a certain type of story, a parable. Really now, it consists of only one verse. Let me read it for you, however, the introductory one as well, the 13th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, verses 20 and 21.....first the question, then the very simple illustration:

"And again He said, Whereunto shall I liken
the Kingdom of God? . . . "

(you're asking the question, what's the
Kingdom of God like? -- well now today
I'm going to tell you what it's like --'
and this was His one sentence)

"It is like leaven which a woman took and hid
in three measures of meal until the whole
was leavened."

Don't misunderstand me when I put it for you this way: Jesus was Mary's boy. Now, almost any school teacher, any mother can understand that. Usually there is one child, one youngster among many, who is a bit more responsive than the others may be. Jesus was Mary's boy. And while He spent time at home I think He was very close to Mary, and Mary had her own way as she responded to Him. I can give you that on good authority because you can read in the Scriptures for yourself how when Mary looked at this one of her children, who was a bit different, she "pondered these things, and kept them in her heart" -- in a way, I dare say, that she did not as she was related to the other children whom God had given her.

Now, there in that home in Nazareth, when Jesus spent many an hour there, He became much aware of her household duties, her responsibilities. And I can picture Him observing her when it came time to bake bread, how she went about it: she took the leaven, or the yeast, and mixed it up, inserted it, projected it into the flour. And then He noted how it had to have a warm place, and how she may have covered it with cloth. And then after a while, quietly -- the result would be evident! It was all happening -- from the inside out.

...Jesus said -- "That's exactly the way the Kingdom of God is! Yeast is introduced into the world...it begins to ferment, it becomes active, dynamic, it permeates everything of which it is part. And the result? -- is eventuated, and there it is!

Now there are several things that you and I need to say to ourselves regarding this little story that He told....

one -- It's an inside job. It's something that happens on the inside. You may say it happens quietly -- but you've got to say it happens! And it happens from the inside where this work is being done, to use a figure of speech. It always happens on the inside -- that's where it takes place.

Why am I making much of that? Because I'm absolutely convinced, and I think the years have taught me this one lesson in particular, that if you're going to have a changed world, you have to have changed people. You may change the plumbing....but that in itself will never do the trick. You may channel any amount of money into a ghetto, but simply restructuring the community in itself will never do the trick. Changed people make the changed situation.

I am wondering if I can be very frank with you now and give you a very simple illustration: some years back when I had the good fortune to be the Dean of the Washington District, in the days when churches were just beginning to integrate, there was a congregation that was considering a pastor, and the pastor told that congregation, "I'll not become your pastor unless you make it a matter of record that you're going to integrate, that you'll welcome anyone into this fellowship of believers of this congregation that you're asking me to serve."

Well now, I'm not in a position to tell you where that congregation was, as far as its thinking was concerned regarding integration, but I do know that while I did not know the pastor, I would fault him in my own mind and I would become judgmental, because it seems to me it's the pastor's job to come to those people and to help them in their changing attitude, to bring them to the place where they would be willing to do this sort of thing. Someone has to inject the yeast....someone has to indicate the desirability....someone has to prove the possibility....someone has to do the motivating. When yeast goes to work, it ferments on the inside, and eventually the change is readily evident - - as any woman who bakes bread knows.

You must also have noticed this: that once the yeast is put in there, it becomes resistless, it goes to work! And as Jesus said in His parable, it keeps on working until it does everything that it's meant to do. You can't stop it. That's why it keeps rising and rising and rising.

One of my younger brothers had an automobile agency. And in connection

with that agency he had a garage in which repair work was done. And while he lived I thoroughly enjoyed going to visit him -- he was a very vital person, a very down-to-earth person, and I learned a great deal when I was in that garage, and especially if I could be there incognito -- I could gather a lot of sermon material -- far more than I could use! I think of one day in particular when a fellow came in and I could see that he had rascal's blood coursing through his veins just by the look in his eyes.....and he had worked in a bake-shop for his uncle....and he and his uncle never got along too well.

....now one day his uncle was away from the premises, and for some reason he couldn't explain, they'd prepared far more dough than they had orders for bread. And he quickly realized that this could bring down on him the wrath of his uncle. So what to do in a case like that, before the uncle came back? Well, thoughtlessly they gathered all the dough together that was surplus dough and threw it in the trunk of a car on the parking lot well that's exactly what happened! -- You're absolutely right -- you just couldn't stop it -- it was irresistible!

Are you willing to believe that that's the way with the Kingdom of God? That's the next thing that needs to be said. People ask me sometimes: "Pastor, what do you think, is the world getting better or getting worse?" And I suppose it depends how I feel. There are times when I think the world is getting worse - - I've seen more evil in my lifetime than I ever thought could exist! My answer is: the world is getting both better and worse simultaneously.

I never cease to marvel at the kind of good that's being surfaced in this life by people such as you. If one had time this morning he could give you chapter and verse of the exceedingly wonderful things that are happening -- as an example, in and through Saint Luke Church! -- where the yeast is at work. This I most certainly believe.

I should also tell you that this change on the inside is the way it happens, and I believe our Blessed Lord was committed to that. I keep reminding myself as I read the New Testament that nowhere is there any evidence -- now be careful how you respond to this -- nowhere is there any evidence that Jesus Christ called a committee meeting....nowhere is there any evidence that Jesus Christ framed a resolution, important as resolutions may be. But there is evidence repeatedly how He would go to this person and that person, touch that person's life so that that person from the inside out would become transformed. Edwin Markham used to say:

"Why build these cities glorious,
If man unbuilt goes;
In vain we build the work
Unless the builder also grows."

You need a changed man if you want a changed world.

Nathaniel Hawthorne in one of his writings has what he calls the Holocaust. As I understand it, it's really an account of a great big bonfire, where some people have said, "Let's get rid of all the evil in the world, and that way we'll have one up on the Devil -- we'll get rid of all the evil."

....according to Nathaniel Hawthorne, and I'm speaking freely now, he stands by gleefully, seeing them toss in this thing and toss in that thing as they're trying to get rid of all the evil . . . and the Devil is supposed to say, "They'll never have done with me because they'll never figure out how they can toss in on that bonfire the human heart."

For as long as the human heart will entertain evil, the Devil will always be in business. In fact, in the days of Jesus, they used to talk about leaven, the yeast that worked for evil -- Jesus Christ turns that around! -- and allows us to believe that the yeast can work for good! -- which I most certainly believe.

I should also tell you as we deal with this text, hurriedly as it may be, that that yeast is a very active thing, and if you please, a very disturbing thing, in order that the final result may be evidenced. Jesus Christ, once He comes into our hearts, can unsettle us, can disturb us. I'm not so sure that you've ever really had an encounter with Jesus Christ unless you have been dissatisfied with yourself. unless He's disturbed you, and created in you an intense desire to be something better than you are!

No man can be in the presence of Jesus Christ without being troubled by the fact that he is as he is. Alcibiades used to say to Socrates, "Socrates, I hate you, because when I'm in your company I find myself becoming ashamed of myself!" -- for Socrates would introduce that ingredient of a relationship that would make a man think in terms not only of what he is but what he could become. And that's the everlastingly glorious thing that happens when a man is encountered by Jesus Christ -- he is disturbed to become good. You'd never get a loaf of bread if there were not the unsettling, the dynamic influence of the yeast.

I want to thank you very much for what you allow me to see happening here in Saint Luke, for those of you who are as yeast, causing a ferment, a brilliant disturbance in a holy way to the glory of God. And each one of us is meant to be as yeast.

When I was a member of the Board of World Missions of our Church, I chaired the Committee on Candidates For Missionary Service, and I remember the responsibility that I had when I would interrogate these people who felt called by the Lord to cross the waters and witness for Jesus Christ. I used to say to myself, I wonder what would happen if I would say to them, as I did, "Why do you want to go abroad in the name of Jesus Christ?" And invariably they'd say, "Because we want to witness to His love and to His truth -- we want to tell the world about Jesus." And then I was always tempted -- which I did on occasion -- to introduce the second question:

"Well, how well are you doing this where you happen to be right now -- ?"

....is the yeast at work where you happen to live? where you happen to work?
-- today? Now that's a good question.
(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"OUR BITTER NEED"
(Matthew 7:24-27)

THE WORLD, O GOD, is too much with us, there is tension, there is strain. But for a little while, now, give us some measure of understanding as we give attention to the interpretation of Your Word. Through Jesus Christ Thy Son, our Lord, Who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

Matthew 7:24-27

You will not find anywhere in Scripture what I am about to tell you. You'll need to keep that in mind. But I have reason to believe that what I'm about to tell you could have happened the way I tell you.

The teenage carpenter apprentice was eager to get away from the carpenter shop. It had not been an easy day. He had made arrangements with some of His teenage friends that He'd meet them up on the hill that overlooked Nazareth. But He was late. They were waiting. And when He did come, one of the youngsters rather impatiently said, "What ailed you, Jesus -- what took you so long?" And Jesus, the teenage apprentice in the carpenter shop, had a very deep look on His face, and He said, "I'll tell you after while."

They didn't run to the hilltop, they walked slowly. And when they got there and sat down, this is what Jesus said . . .

"All day long my father was troubled. You can't work side by side in the carpenter shop and not discover that something is troubling him. So tonight when I wanted to come out here and meet you, I did leave, walked a little distance.....and then I found myself constrained to go back into the carpenter shop.

...and I went to my father and I stood alongside of him and I put my hand on his shoulder and I said,

"Tell me, father, what is it? Something's troubling you."

....and after a while Joseph volunteered this information:

"I lost the contract. It was a sizeable house. It would have meant something to us especially with

winter coming along and prices as they are.

But I lost the contract."

...and then Jesus waits until Joseph decides to continue the conversation. And Joseph says, "This is the way it was, Jesus -- I had to tell the man he was stupid -- I had to tell the man he was throwing his money away! I had to be honest with myself. You see, he wanted to build this house -- and a very attractive place, down in the valley, sheltered from the wind, near the water. But I told him, on the basis of my experience, that when the storms would come, and the flash floods would appear, and the rain would descend -- the house would collapse! It wasn't built on a very sure foundation -- I told him it was being built on sand.

But he said to me, 'My friend here -- he built his house three months ago. He thoroughly enjoys it! He's very happy! He doesn't have to go for water -- it's right within reach. He's sheltered from the wind -- very happy! He built his house three months ago!'

"I insisted, Jesus, and I said, 'Up there is the better place. It has a rock foundation -- that's where you ought to build. You build down here, you'll regret it.' He didn't listen to me, Jesus. I lost the contract. We could have used the money, but, Jesus, a man has to live with himself. I have to be honest, and I was."

And then Jesus, with the wisdom that became Him, turns to Joseph and He says, "And what bothers you most, my father, because you lost the contract? -- or because you have to stand by and see a man pay the price for his stupidity and his folly?"

The years pass.

The teenage apprentice in the carpenter shop becomes a wandering preacher. The great moment of His preaching career seems to have arrived. There are thousands of people in front of him. He's preaching now what we remember as the

Sermon on the Mount. He's been going on paragraph after paragraph, and holding people spellbound. In fact the recorder of the Gospel says that once He was finished, people said he preached as one who had authority, and not as the scribeswhich is simply to say, there was vitality to His preaching, and they listened earnestly.

The sermon is about to be concluded.

One asks earnestly now, what happens when sermons are preached? I hesitate to ask that question because the last time I asked this congregation the rhetorical question: Who listens to sermons? Who remembers them, anyway? -- the next night a member of the congregation met me and said, "Pastor, I listen to sermons, and I remember them, and the two I remember most I heard in Saint Luke Church, and both were preached by your son."

The sermons are preached, the people listen, closely or perfunctorily, and then they go their way, the congregation is dispersed....

...some people leave saying to the preacher,

"That was a very inspiring sermon -- I listened intently."

....some people leave saying,

"That was a dull sermon. It didn't speak to my need at all."

What is the acid test of a sermon?

The acid test of a sermon is: What happens inside you, and the kind of person you become once the sermon has been preached. This is the way a lady said it recently:

"I have only one test of a good sermon: not, does it stir my feelings, or inform my mind, or enliven my imagination; but simply this: does it send me away resolved to live a better life?"

The test of this sermon will lie in what you do once the Benediction has been pronounced, if in the course of this day you will be a bit more kind than you were yesterday, then the sermon has not been preached in vain....

....if in the course of the week that's yet to come people will detect in you that measure of integrity that becomes the Christian character, in a very sharp and glowing way, in a way perhaps that was not nearly as sharp last week, then this sermon will not have been preached in vain....

The acid test of this sermon will be in the application of the truth that's inherent

in its preaching. And that's exactly the way Jesus Christ felt when He finished preaching the Sermon on the Mount. Reminiscent of that day, figuratively speaking, in the carpenter shop, when He had that encounter with Joseph, He now concludes the Sermon on the Mount. This is the way the 7th chapter ends:

"Therefore whosoever hears these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him to a wise man which built his house upon a rock; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine:

For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

The sermon is over. And Jesus said, "Now the acid test is this -- how will you translate what I have said into action? It isn't how well you hear, it's what you do with what you've heard . . . " That's the acid test.

Now, let's get back to the parable. It would have been far simpler, you see, to have built the house down there on the sand. It would not have taken nearly as much effort, and you wouldn't have to carry the water. So Jesus fashions this into a sermon that deals with character. You're not allowed to miss that point in the preaching, if you don't mind. For Jesus had as an object the kind of a person each of us is meant to be. Biblically and theologically we say Jesus Christ came in order that we might be saved. But for a person who doesn't have the orientation that you have, who would look at Jesus Christ not through the Christian lens, the appeal of Christ can still be made, because Jesus Christ is interested in the fashioning of character---the kind of person whose life can withstand the storms of life, the strain and the stress -- which is bound to come.

I am constantly impressed by the fact that when I read the teachings of Jesus, how He always assumed that life would be a matter of storm and stress and strain. We do people a disservice when we allow them to think that they can escape trial and tension. Pastor David recently came from a youth workers' conference, and as my custom is, when he came back I said, "What did you learn?" And he said,

"I learned this: that the theme that was struck repeatedly in that conference was this, that those of us who work with young people are in duty bound to remind them that as the future unfolds they will have to deal with strain and stress and tension -- that none of us lives in a problem-free world." Jesus Christ was always talking about that kind of thing. And so a person could be held in good stead, He concludes His sermon with talking about the foundation upon which a person is meant to build his life.

And then He did something that's absolutely amazing. He put it all out front, and He said, "If a person will only listen to what I say, and if a person will only do them, translate my words into action, he can face the storm and stress of life."

...can you imagine someone saying that!

...can you imagine a preacher standing up and saying,

"Listen to what I say -- and your life will be fashioned for good, and your character will be such that no storm in life will destroy you."

...no one had ever made a claim like that.

I know a measure of satisfaction in realizing that for 40 years I've tried to echo that voice, tried to make plain to people that the teaching of Jesus Christ is to be respected....that he's to be trusted. When David Livingstone went to darkest Africa the thing that held him in good stead was the word of Jesus Christ. It's a matter of record for David Livingstone that he said, "No matter what happened, I always believed that I could trust the word of Jesus Christ."

Arnold Toynbee, in his recent study of the history of civilization, maintains that every civilization that the world has known that has collapsed, has fallen -- not because of famine.....not because of plague....not even because of some external foe; but has fallen because of the moral decay at the foundation upon which they were building their society.

Someone once asked the sage, "In what shape is this world?" And he answered bluntly, "It's in a hellova shape." No matter where you may look today you may see the evidence of those who refuse to accept at face value the teaching of Jesus Christ. What affords me personally no end of pleasure is to meet someone who has lived out the days of his years and come to the sunset slope of life as a good and strong character who permits me to believe that "I took Jesus Christ at His word and built my life upon His teaching." There is no greater foundation, and anyone who knows anything at all about building knows how essential the foundation is.

"ON HOW NOT TO BE CRIPPLED BY GUILT"

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God
our Father and from His Son our
Saviour Jesus Christ, our Blessed
Lord. Amen.

As valuable as any book that I've read in recent years is the one to which I have referred constantly in the last few months. In fact, I have re-read it twice. It's a book that was written by a man who once stood in the Saint Luke pulpit, a distinguished preacher, an able administrator, for he was President of the Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. An excellent writer, Dr. Alvin Rogness, in the fullness of his years, has written a book called "A Book of Comfort."

As he looks back over the years that God has given him he thinks in terms of what has vexed some people at some stage or another. The series of essays deal with such things as "When Your Marriage is In Trouble" . . . "When Your Children Rebel" . . . "When You Can't Forgive Yourself" . . . It's in that chapter that he shares with his readers the report of a brother pastor to him of a woman who came for counseling.

...she was guilt-ridden. You may as well know, she had committed an indiscretion, there was a time when she was unfaithful to her husband.

She could never quite free herself from that fact, and after a number of years had run their course, she came to the pastor.

What do you suppose the pastor said to her? I'm happy to tell you he said exactly what the pastor should have said - - because the pastor met with her as God's spokesman, God's representative.

He began by telling her that we're all sinners. Whether you would have begun that way, I don't know, and I have reason to believe that he also gave her to understand that what she did anyone might have done. Now be careful! -- but that's a point at which one could begin.

Then he went on to tell her that we're all sinners, every single one of us, and every one of us can be disobedient. There is always the possibility of our falling from grace, none of us ever has it made, not even as we breathe our very last.

....I presume this is what he said....then he quoted Scripture and indicated to her that God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a God of love, who while we were yet sinners, God was in Christ

is a God of love, who while we were yet sinners, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.....

Which is simply to remind us that He did not wait for us to become good until He became our friend, but in our sinfulness He takes the overture, and proves Himself kindly-disposed toward us, with redeeming love.

Then he allowed her an act of confession, indicating godly contrition, and was able to pronounce her forgiven - - and all of this within the Christian context.

He sensed that she was greatly relieved, I presume, and then she almost spoiled it all by asking the question: "Now how soon do I tell my husband about this?"

...how do you suppose he responded? -- well-nigh perfectly, I dare say. "What is there to tell? God has blotted it out! You are forgiven!"

From my perspective, I think she didn't quite understand the meaning of forgiveness.....from my perspective, I don't think she knew how to handle guilt, even at that precious level to which the pastor had brought her. It seems to me, unwittingly she was going to forfeit the handling of the guilt now, and that's what would have happened had she rushed right home and told her husband. The guilt she had carried -- God now had taken it away! -- "You're forgiven."

I come to you this morning to talk to you, and the sermon bears the title, "On How Not To Be Crippled By Guilt." We're all sinners, we're all guilty in the sight of God. But we're not meant to be crippled by guilt. We need to talk about that this morning.

The text is from the 7th verse of the 6th chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah, in my judgment, is one of the grandest men in the Old Testament. Not known by enough of you, not appreciated by enough of you, he's given us that marvelous understanding of God as the Suffering Servant, who's opened our eyes to that marvelous love of God. Isaiah had a great vision -- the whole 6th chapter of his book tells about that experience, something that happened to him while he was in church. It could happen to you! I'd be very happy if it were to happen right now! Read that 6th chapter: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and lifted up!" He had his vision of the grandeur and the glory and the majesty of God. And then something happened to him -- he was overwhelmed by his sense of sin, and his guilt. For when he sees God as He is, Isaiah says, "Woe is me, for I am unclean, and I live

in the company of people who are just as unclean."

And then something absolutely wonderful happens -- God takes the initiative, God sends one of His attendants to cleanse Isaiah, and he hears the words spoken which constitute this text: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven."

I am happy to tell you that Isaiah had that sense of guilt when he saw the majesty and the goodness and the greatness of God. I'm happy to tell you that. When you find yourself in the presence of that which is perfect, and that which is supreme, then you begin to feel your inadequacies. I've little patience with preachers who go around from place to place preaching hellfire, brimstone and damnation. It may be necessary, but I don't know that it's very salutary. Maybe it's just my way of reaction.

I've gotten past that stage in my life when I wanted to be good because I didn't want to suffer the pangs of the damned. That may work with children, and you keep talking about what's going to happen if you're bad, you go to Hell. But I'm not so sure that it's the best of all motivations to want to go to Heaven just because you don't want to go to Hell. How it may be with you I don't know, but I'm not turned on by these bill-boards, signs, that say "WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?" -- important as that may be . . . "YOUR SINS WILL FIND YOU OUT" -- that doesn't do much for me. I know about my sins, I'm confronted by them daily. I suffer a measure of depression because of them. I've traveled quite a road in my spiritual pilgrimage. But I am comforted at this stage in my life by the prospect of Heaven -- which constantly makes me want to be better than I have been. There is no greater motivating force in the life of any person than to know that he's being loved!

Out in Minneapolis some time ago they tried a very interesting experiment. One of the leading congregations purchased space on billboards, trying to counteract the negative influence of some of the billboards, trying to make an impression upon people and their relationship to God. A very simple thing -- listen to it now....You're driving along, you look up, you see a billboard -- what do you read?

"I LOVE YOU -- IS THAT OKAY?"

(signed) JESUS CHRIST . . "

That's a happy thought! That's what happened to Isaiah. He was caught up by the majesty and the glory and the goodness and the grace of God. Then he responded by saying, "I'm unworthy....I am a sinner."

He didn't get that way by going to psychiatrists, essential though they may be on occasion. He didn't get that way, this sense of sin and guilt, by trying to compare and contrast himself with other people, who could have been better or worse than he. He had that sense of guilt because he found himself caught up with the majesty and the goodness and the graciousness of God. And then he saw himself the sinner that he was. And that's a healthy kind of guilt! -- when you're caught up by that kind of thing.

You must listen to me again if I've told you this before. One of the men who's left a mark upon the fabric of my heart and helped me to understand what a wonderful thing it is to be a pastor was the man who became my friend in my teenage years when I went to Camp Nawakwa....and then he followed me all through college and seminary....

....and when the time came for Winifred and me to be married, he performed the ceremony...

....when the time came for our two boys to be baptized, he cradled them in his arms -- Dr. Harvey Daniel Hoover.

He used to tell us about the time when he was very young, and he was asked to conduct a funeral service for a person who died as a street woman in Chicago. Being young, his first temptation was to go and preach a sermon -- pointing a finger to hell of all those people, telling them about the wrath of God -- that their sins will find them out -- the wages of sin is death....gung-ho for that kind of thing. He'd show them!

Then it occurred to him, he was set aside to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ -- good news. He went and conducted that funeral service. Talk about hell? No. He didn't have to -- they knew all about hell! It was their life, style, they lived it. He talked about a Heavenly Father, who was bruised by carrying the iniquities of His children, he talked about a Heavenly Father who loved them, just as they were, in order that some day they could be better than they were.

That's the way we're won into the Kingdom, we find ourselves being loved. And that's what God's love is all about. But it does bring this sense of guilt . . . unworthy as I am, what now do I do with it?

It's a very salutary thing for a person to remember that he is a sinner. We are all sinners, every single one of us. Sometimes there are people who fault the Christian Church and say we talk too much about sin. As an example -- yourselves, this morning . . . no sooner do we get you inside these walls, set you down, stood

you up, you sang your hymn, and then what did we do? We put words on your lips

"We poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature
sinful and unclean . . . "

Our Episcopal friends sometimes are a bit bolder, they worked into their liturgy:

"We miserable - - we most miserable sinners . . . " We're not that hard on you.

Do we talk too much about sin? In the New Members' Group some time ago there was that gal who said, "I have trouble being a Lutheran. This is the first Lutheran church I ever attended and I don't know that I'm going to join in a very comfortable way." The woman said, "You see, as soon as I come to church you remind me that I'm a sinner." Do we talk too much about sin?

We need to talk about sin. But we need to talk about something more than that. All of us are sinners, but we are sinners who are being saved! We are sinners who are meant to be forgiven. Now in this matter of guilt, can a man forgive himself? I'm not so sure that he can. This has been a problem for me. I wrestle with this: I cannot forgive myself.

I'm not alone. Man's inability to forgive himself has been demonstrated in a strange novel by Albert Camus called "The Fall." The central character in the story is a Parisian lawyer, you may remember, who was quite secure in his self-esteem. Then one night, walking home late across the bridge over the Seine, something happened which he was never able to forget -- it is as following. Said he, "I'd already gone some fifty yards, when I heard a sound as of a body striking the water. I heard a cry, repeated several times, of a body going down-stream....and then it suddenly ceased. I wanted to run, and yet I did not stir. Then slowly under the rain I went away. I did not tell anyone. The next day and the days following I did not read the papers."

...always thereafter the memory of the incident haunted him. Years later, still bearing his inner sense of guilt, he cried out --
"O young woman, throw yourself in the water again, so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us! It's too late now. It will always be too late!" That's if you subscribe to something less than the Christian perspective. With God it's never too late. There is always the possibility, as the dying thief on the cross reminds us.

Now, how do you handle the sins of guilt? Well, you begin with the fact that you're a sinner. There is such a thing as original sin. None of us will ever make it with passing marks, that is, on our own. I'm appreciative of a book that I've

not read, but I'm appreciative of the title. It feeds my soul when I look at it lying there on the stand: "THE COURAGE TO BE IMPERFECT." Most of us want to be perfect, most of us want to have a good reputation. Most of us want to be thought of as better than we actually are. It takes a bit of courage to accept the fact that we're not as good as we could be. Maybe that's what's meant by the "good news" of original sin. It is a salutary thing to begin at that point....one dare not end there.

We are sinners, yes. But we are sinners who are being forgiven. We're people who have been wounded in the fray, we've not resisted temptation successfully. The Kingdom of God would never be advanced if God depended on perfect people -- there would be none around. The Kingdom of God has been advanced greater, I dare say, by those who have been wounded in the fray. Peter -- who made that great contribution to the early Church -- a forgiven sinner. Every single one of the disciples, that nucleus of people who turned the world upside-down! -- every one of them forsook Christ and ran away. But Jesus Christ came back and said, " -- but I love you . . . I forgive you . . . you can be empowered."

I've come to the conclusion that the wounded can still truly serve our Blessed Lord and you need to remember that when you handle your guilt. He takes it away now so we can be made free to serve Him.

One of the things I'd like to do which I am sure I'll never get time to is to visit some of the cemeteries and record interesting epitaphs. There is one in New York that I'd like to visit. They tell me there's a tombstone there that only has one word on it -- no name of the person, no date of birth nor death. Only one word: FORGIVEN. It triggers all kinds of thoughts immediately, doesn't it?

...man or woman? . . . husband or wife? . . . father or son? . . . mother or daughter? . . . brother or sister? . . . what was the sin? . . .

Don't waste your energy trying to figure it out -- that's not the important thing at the moment. The important thing is that this person died in the sure and certain knowledge that ours is a God of love, who is willing to forgive, who knows how that person's latter years were empowered and strengthened by the joy that only the forgiven can really know.

"Come unto me, all ye who sin" -- let me put it for you that way. "I'll give you a yoke -- it's My yoke -- by which you will serve Me. I will carry your guilt." Only the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is able to say that -- to people like you...and me. Take Him at His word.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

Had only that stupid builder taken the long view -- and that's something else that Jesus Christ is constantly trying to have us do. He's constantly introducing the Eternal Dimension, the thing that's going to happen the day after tomorrow, because the day after tomorrow does come. And He's always asking us to make that kind of investment.

As some of you know, Winifred and I have this little place that we built in the hills of home. Some 30 years ago we began it -- like a kitchen carpenter kind of mechanic thing it was. Much of it we did ourselves, with no great planning. Now we pay the price! -- the things that have to be done all over again, and at extra cost, because at the very beginning we didn't take the long view.

I couldn't appreciate it at the time . . . I can appreciate it now -- when I remember the first time we were visited by a master-carpenter, who when he saw the cinder-block wall and the jambs that were being put in place in the door-way, he turned to me and he said, "And how do you plan to finish this place?" -- he was taking the long view, he saw things that I could not see. For a person who trusts Jesus Christ in the building of his life, Jesus Christ is always taking the long view! There is always the day after tomorrow -- and it does come.

"Now," said Jesus Christ as He finished His sermon, "translate what I've said into action -- and do it as soon as you can!"

....because a person's character is fashioned not only by what he thinks, not only by what he says....but a person's character is really fashioned by what he does. It constitutes the cement and the mortar that holds it all together....

This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"UNMISTAKABLY GOD"
(Matthew 2:1-2)

Into my heart, into my heart,
Into my heart, come, Lord Jesus;
Come in today, come in to stay,
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.

Matthew 2:1-2

I have not hesitated to be somewhat transparent to you, the people for whom God has given me a measure of responsibility. You easily know where I stand and where I feel. It's in that manner and that mood that I tell you that some sermons come easily . . . some sermons do not come easily. For some there is struggle, for some there is the re-writing and the re-structuring, and going back again and again and falling upon your knees.

The sermon that I'm about to preach to you this morning is not the sermon that I had intended to preach. You may be interested in knowing how this sermon came about. First, it came about quite easily. It came 1 - 2 - 3.

I'm numbered among some of you whose sleep can be broken at night. It happens more often than I would care to have it happen, but I've learned to adjust to it, and one of the things that I've discovered is that it could be God's call to me to pray, to think, and to reflect.

So as I accept it in that manner, the other morning I got up, built a fire in the fireplace and sat there and anticipated this day, the beginning of Advent in Saint Luke Church. And just like that! -- it came to me -- the text gripped me:

"And it came to pass in those days there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east and we have come . . . "

.....just like that! -- the text gripped me. And just like that it happened -- 1 - 2 - 3. And I will be very happy if the sermon would make its impact on you in like manner -- 1 - 2 - 3.

First, it occurred to me that the most wonderful things in life that ever have happened to us, for the most part have come unsought. Now you think about that for a moment. . . .

The most precious things, for the most part, have
come to us unsought.

One waxes for the moment quite personally --

...that one person in this world who loves me the way no one else loves me -- I did not get up one morning and say to myself, now today I shall find her and I shall claim her. I did not. But there was that day when she appeared on the horizon -- just like that!

...I'm thinking of the two parishes that God has given me the privilege to serve in my forty years in the ministry -- two absolutely wonderful congregations -- I did not seek either one. Just like that! -- God gave me the opportunity to be among them. . . .

The exceedingly precious things in life come to us unsought.

Here in this congregation, the fashioning, the developing, the maturing of perfectly beautiful friendships -- and each friend -- unsought! According to God's own schedule we encountered them, they appeared on the scene. It's a salutary thing to keep that in mind.

God, the initiator -- God having our needs in mind, God operating according to His own schedule. I've had my trouble with that, as some of you know. I've had my moments when I've tried to tell God exactly how He ought to act, what He ought to do, and when. And then I'm reminded of that man that I saw sitting on the bench on that old plantation in Alabama -- I call him my "Saint In Ebony." I walked up to him and I said, hoping to trigger some kind of conversation, "You look like a man of deep faith." That's all I had to say. It triggered it.

He began like an avalanche. "I've learned to trust God," he said, "He always comes -- never maybe when you call Him -- not always when you want Him to and in a way you want Him to - - but He's always on time, and He's never late -- He's always on schedule."

. . . I treasure the thought, of course I do....#1: God is the initiator, and God always has some good thing in mind for you and for me. The most precious things in life come to us unsought, and would you believe me if I were to tell you quite frankly -- turning this now into a confessional: the things that have caused me the greater grief in life may have been the things that I tried to manipulate, the things that I tried to control, when I tried to dictate, when I even endeavored to frustrate the grace of God.

Point Number One: The exceedingly precious things in life come unsought, as God, mindful of our needs, takes the initiative.

I give it to you on good authority. The wise men said, "The star appeared!" They did not fashion it, they did not create it, they did not design it, it was not of their making. God put that star there -- God took the initiative. God is always making overtures in our direction. One of the most beautiful passages in the Bible is the second chapter of Luke -- the shepherds in the field, and suddenly -- there was the heavenly host -- it appeared! The angel came -- you get that? -- the angel came! God coming to them, God taking the initiative -- God offering.

Point Number One: The exceedingly precious things that happen to us in life come at God's initiation.

Point Number Two: It all unfolded just like this, I tell you. Happy indeed is that person whose soul is on the alert, who is sensitive enough to be made aware of the foot-prints of God, of the clarion call of God, or the soft whisper of God in the air. It is that person who's on the alert who discovers what God is initiating:

"Earth is crammed with Heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only the man who sees
takes off his shoes and worships;
The rest sit around and eat blackberries."

Just like that -- the star appeared! They recognized it. They responded to the song of the angels. They were a people who were always on the alert, always being made ready to receive. Let me say it again and again and again -- happy indeed, and blessed, is that person who when God begins to take the initiative, is able to recognize the workings of God and reverently puts his finger to his lips and whispers the name of "God!"

Point #3: It is possible to lose the vision splendid. One needs to go back again and again and again and renew one's grip, or its claim upon us. Human as we are, it is possible that we lose the vision splendid -- we were not meant to! Isn't it realistic enough to admit that those wise men did not keep to the road consistently, day-in-and-day-out, month-in-and-month-out, year-in-and-year-out. I have reason to believe, human as I am, and I too have seen visions -- that they had their moments when they detoured . . . they had their moments when they weren't so sure that it was worth the trek. I can imagine how they talked back and forth, one to another, wondering if it was worth paying the price to keep on going until you came to the end of a wandering star.

Point #1: God sets the star shining.

Point #2: Only the spiritually sensitive behold it and see it and desire to follow it.

Point #3: Only those who stay on the road and keep following day after day will eventually arrive!

God is always appealing to the royal that is within us. We are the ones who are in duty bound to keep responding by being loyal to the royal.

Longfellow once wrote a poem called EXCELSIOR....you know that means higher. His purpose was to display in a series of pictures the life of a man of virtues,

resisting all temptations, laying aside all fears, heedless of all warnings and pressing right on to accomplish his purpose. His motto is "Excelsior!" -- higher -- higher -- higher.

...he passes through the Alpine village, to the rough cold paths of the world, around the peasants -- they cannot understand this pilgrim -- and where the watchword is an unknown tongue....

...he disregards the happiness of domestic peace, he sees the glaciers, he sees his fate....

...he disregards the warning of an old man's wisdom....he does not allow the fascination of a woman's love to grip him or to delay him. To all of these he answers "Excelsior!" -- higher -- higher -- higher!"

.....filled with aspirations, he perishes, without having reached the perfections he longed for.....and the voice heard in the air is the promise of immortality, and the progress, ever upward -- "Excelsior -- higher -- higher."

It becomes every one of us, every now and then, to go back and examine his dreams, and to think of those days particularly in his impressionable youth when all those grand and noble things possessed us. It was to a degree an unsettling day for me when I reached for my college yearbooks. You remember how some of them read, don't you? -- those little paragraphs that they put with each photograph, fellow classmate -- extravagant in our praise, and yet indicative, perhaps, of the things we felt they were capable of achieving. I was humbled by what I read, what someone thought of me. And I've asked myself, have I pursued the vision splendid? -- how often have I gotten off the track? -- how frequently the vision has become dim! Have I been willing to pay the price in order to continue to follow the vision?

Sarah Teasdale, God bless her soul, had that poem called "Barter" in which she

reminds us to a degree that we're willing to sacrifice and spend any kind of money for material things, but then she probes the mind and pricks the conscience by reminding us that beauty and grace and truth and love have their price too! One of her stanzas begins in this manner:

"Life has loveliness to sell . . . "

and then she concludes by saying:

"Any moment of ecstasy is worth the price."

But as we pursue it we falter, we fail, of course we do.

Those wise men did not consistently follow the star. They had their moments, because they were human, when their faith grew dim. Ella Wheeler Wilcox has written:

"As the dead year is clasped by a dead December,
So let your dead sins with your dead days lie;
A new life for yourself, and a new hope - remember
We build our own ladder to climb to the sky.
Stand out in the sunlight of promise,
Forgetting whatever the past held of sorrow or wrong;
We waste half our strength in useless regretting;
We sit by old tombs in the dark too long.

Have you missed in your aim? --
Well the mark is still shining!
Did you faint in the race?
Well, take breath for the next!
Did the clouds drive you back?
But see yonder their lining!
Were you tempted? Did you fall?
Let it serve as a test.

I tell you the future can hold no terrors
For any sad soul while the stars revolve;
If he will stand firm on the grave of his errors,
And instead of regretting, resolve!

It's never too late to begin re-building -- renewing -- having hope restored.

How fortunate we are to belong to a church that observes the Advent tradition! For what is Advent-tide but a reminder from God calling us back again and again: "This way, this way to Bethlehem! -- here's the star! -- Listen, the angels still sing!" That's what Advent does for us -- releases our desire to be loyal to the royal.

Somebody said to Michelangelo, "What are you really up to?" (I'm para-phrasing,

of course) - suggesting, "How is it possible that you do what you do?" And Michelangelo's answer was a very simple one. When he looked at the block of marble - - "I simply release the angel that's inside."

In the Jewish Talmud, my friend, it is said that at the moment of conception, when the egg is about to be fertilized, the Court of Heaven is assembled, and one of the messengers of God gathers up that fertilized egg and then the Court decides at that moment the kind of person that will come into this world -- then and there is it decided whether that person will be rich, or poor...famous, or ordinary....live long, or short. But in the Court of Heaven there is one thing that is not decided: whether that person will be good, or bad. Even Heaven allows a decision such as that to be made by the human being.

God made us to respond to Him -- that's why He sets a star shining -- that's why He makes it possible for angels to sing. I for one, my friend, would like to get back on the road, and stay on the road, and keep my eye on that star, and listen for the angels as I never have before. . . . and I invite you to join me.

* * *

(this sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE FACT OF CHRISTMAS"

QUIET our minds and hush our hearts,
O God. We make so little time to do
this sort of thing, to give some
measure of undivided attention to
the interpretation of Your Word. To
the end that we should make the most
of it, cleanse us by Your Holy Spirit;
Through Jesus Christ Thy Son, our Lord,
Who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

Matthew 2:2

Do you remember these words?-- let me read them for you. They come from
a fairy tale:

" The snow flakes fell on her long yellow hair that
curled so prettily on her neck, but she did not think
of that now. Lights were shining in all the windows,
and there was a tempting smell of roast goose. Yes,
she was thinking of that.

In a corner formed by two houses, one of which
projected a little beyond the other, she sat down
and huddled herself together. She had tucked her
little feet under her, but she felt colder and
colder and colder....she dared not go home, for she
had not sold any matches, nor earned a single half-
penny. Her father would beat her. And it was cold
at home, too. They had only the roof above them
through which the wind whistled, although the largest
cracks had been stopped up with straw and rags.

Her little hands were almost dead with the cold.
And then it occurred to her, Ah, one little match
might do it! If she dared take only one out of the
box, strike it on the wall and warm her fingers!
She took one out. How it sputtered and burned . . . "

She lights one match, one match after another, and in the glow of each match,
as long as it burns, she's caught up in fantasy.

As an example -- you remember the story now?

....there was that bright stove, a great iron stove with
polished brass feet and ornaments. In her fantasy, before
it she becomes warm....but then the match goes out.

....another match - - and its glow opens up for her a dining room resplendent with shining china dishes and a sumptuous meal. But the match burns out and the scene disappears.....

....this time another match, and she is sitting, thanks to its glow, under a beautiful Christmas tree. The green boughs were lit up with thousands of candles, and the candles rose higher and higher until they were only the stars in the sky . . . one of them fell, leaving a long fiery trail behind it . . . "Now someone is dying" said the little girl, for her old grandmother, the only person who had ever been good to her, who now was dead, had once said that when a star falls, a soul goes up to heaven....
....she lights another match. This time she envisions her grandmother,,and pleads with her grandmother to take her to heaven. Fearful that she will disappear with the match burns out, she lights the whole box - - "I know that you will go away too when the match is burned out -- you will vanish, like the warm stove, like the splendid Christmas tree . . ." Quickly lighting the whole box of matches, for she did not want to let her grandmother go, the matches burned with such a blaze that it was lighter than day, and the old grandmother had never appeared so beautiful and so tall.....

.....Taking the little girl in her arms, she flew up with her in brightness and joy, high, so high, and there was no cold, there was no hunger, there was no sorrow. For they were with God.

I have to remind you, it all occurred to her in her dream. It was pure

fantasy. Because beyond fantasy there is such a thing as cruel fact. In the corner of the house, in the cold dawn, the little girl was still sitting with red cheeks and a smile upon her lips, frozen to death. The child sat up stiffly holding her matches of which a whole box had been burned . . . fantasy, I tell you, that's what it is.

Fantasy, I also tell you, is something that people make of Christmas. They dream, they fancitize. They make much of the Star . . . but for them it's still unreal. They make much of angels that sing . . . but for them it's still unreal. The sermon on this second Sunday in Advent bears the title: "The Fact of Christmas".....a subtitle could also be: "Not Fantasy, But Fact." The sober truth remains that Christmas is never appreciated unless it's seen as something that did happen -- it's not an unreal thing, it was never meant to be an unreal thing. It was meant to be the most real thing that we could ever experience in our mind, in our heart, in our souls, when we think of God. It did happen.

There was a time in my life, brief though it may have been, when I thought that maybe I'd like to be a physician....there was a time in my life, brief as it was, when I thought I might like to be a lawyer. But even in those impressionable years it had occurred to me that I did not believe that I could deal as frequently as a lawyer must deal with the sordid facts of life. Even in my impressionable years I was a dreamer, an idealist. And that shook me up a bit -- to have to contend with the way people would lay it all out in front of me, in a way that I could not choose. For I would have to know the facts.

Pure irony, I tell you -- I have come to deal with facts. And when people lay bare their souls before me, I find it inescapable. The reality is there, and it must be dealt with.

How would you have felt this morning, if, as I was greeting people before the 8:30 service began, as though an avalanche had suddenly descended in front of me . . . she portrayed for me the bitter cruel world out of which she had

just come to come to this place . . . and the bitter cruel world to which she would have to go once the benediction had been pronounced. Talk about dealing with the sordid facts of life -- how in Heaven's name I've already recognized them. Ironic, isn't it -- I who thought I could not be a lawyer because I could not see life as it is!

Why do I speak to you this way this morning? There's always the temptation to fantacize when it comes to Christmas. At no other time of the year is there a greater temptation, but you'll miss the real meaning of Christmas if you don't see it as a fact. What kind of a fact? -- well why don't you begin at the point where you ought to begin -- it did happen. That's why the Gospel writers recorded so perfectly and completely and succinctly:

"In the days when Herod was king . . . "

....at a particular time

" . . in Bethlehem of Judah . . . "

....in a particular place

" . . . a Mary and a Joseph . . . "

....particular people. It did happen. It's a fact.

"In the days of Herod the king . . . " It's a fact that Herod was a wicked king. There was a time when he was a good man, but there was a total change of personality. There was a time when he even, so it has been said, melted his gold in order to feed the Jews, but then something happened. The older he became the less virtuous he was. He became insane, insanely jealous. He couldn't tolerate anything that was a threat to him, anything that he might lose. He murdered his wife -- you want the facts? -- they are sordid -- am I correct when I tell you he murdered his favorite son, he murdered three other sons . . . do I tell you the facts when it's been reported that realizing that he was being threatened, people were beginning to hate him . . . he coveted for himself that people would cry when he would die, and he issued that strange edict that at the moment of his death there would be a "hit list" of some of

the popular people in the realm would be put to death immediately -- then people would cry! -- if not for him, nonetheless there would be tears shed when he died.

And the most cruel of all things, of course -- he's the one who issued the edict, the slaughter of the innocents. It is in that kind of a world -- I'm giving you the facts -- that God saw fit to offer Jesus Christ.

That's the fact of Christmas . . . "In the days when Herod was king . . . " -- the wicked one -- God gave Himself. And that's a fact, too -- a very sublime fact.

God does not wait for us to become better. God does not wait for us to clean up our world. God does not wait for us to get our own house in order. One of the greatest of all verses in Scripture: "While we are yet sinners, God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself." That's a tremendous truth, a very precious fact of Christmas itself -- God seeing us as we are -- God loving us as we are . . . God not waiting for us to become better, but God coming to us where we are, as we are, encouraging us to become better as He invests Himself in us.

I once wrote a piece. I hoped that there would be a publisher who would find it appealing, but it was rejected on more than one occasion. It was a kind of Christmas-in-reverse. I toyed with the thought as I put those words on paper -- -- God, instead of your coming into this world, we're not fit to welcome you, we're not fit to receive you, we're a bad bunch, God. Instead of your coming, why don't you take all of us up to Heaven?

-- that's the way I thought it would have been better --
" . . . God, you'd have it made that way!"

But I did conclude the article, as you might know, being faithful to the Scriptures -- "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . . " . . . that here in this world, with all of its hatred and hostility, with all of its wickedness, it's the only way in which God's redeeming love can work its

perfect work. And that's something that you and I need to remember as a fact.

In our relationships with other people, unattractive as they may be, lacking all the promise that you may think they ought to have, it's there -- a relationship with that person, that love needs to bring to bear its most precious impact. This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE CIRCLE OF LOVE WHICH IS CHRISTMAS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

No preacher worth his salt ought ever to go to the pulpit without asking himself the question: Is there anything in this sermon that might be helpful to any one person in particular? As I stand at the sacred desk this morning, I ask myself the question, for I have no right to ask for your attention, I have no right to have spent my time and energy in the preparation of this sermon if I have no reason to believe that something, by the grace of God, could be said that might speak to your need, or as the Quakers say, to the condition of your soul.

Where you may be as this sermon is about to begin, I'm not quite certain, but I would suggest this: that if you're the kind of person who, traveling along the highway of life, at one point or another has had a detour, if you've ever gotten off the road, or if perchance you've succumbed to the temptation to go too far on the wrong road, then this sermon, I have reason to believe, could be of value for you.

Now having said all of that, let me say this to you, that the text for this sermon is the same text that was used last Sunday, the same text that was used the First Sunday in Advent, and in all likelihood the same text that will be used next Lord's Day: the first two verses of the second chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship him . . ."

You think of Christmas, you think of Bethlehem. And very properly said, all roads lead to Bethlehem, and eventually any man finds himself on the road that leads to Bethlehem. And because that is true, Sunday by Sunday now during this Advent-tide we're asking you to think about certain people who traveled that road to Bethlehem -- specifically the legendary wise men.

Now as I deal with this text be very patient with me as in a very elementary way I bring to your attention certain things: it was not a solitary person who took to the road. Scriptures say they were wise men -- which leads me to observe immediately that whenever you think of Christmas you think of a circle of love. And in that circle of love which is Christmas you will always find two or more people. Anything less than

two is found outside the circle of love. Christmas, properly understood, is a circle of love, and in that circle always two or more people . . .

-- Mary and Joseph

-- wise men -- the plural

-- shepherds who said one to another, "let us go now even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which has come to pass" . . .

You think of a solitary person? -- and he's outside the circle of love. Think of a solitary person, the innkeeper...wicked King Herod -- they're outside, they never related, they never identified, they never became part of the real Christmas story. That's the first observation: Christmas is a circle of love, and it's to be kept only as you find yourself related to another person. Christmas is always two or more people -- wise men who took to the road in the company of one another.

Happy indeed is that traveler who finds himself related to, identifying with someone else. Poor indeed is that person who as he travels has none to whom he can turn and say, "Look!" -- has none to whom he can turn and evaluate and assess, drawing a measure of encouragement . . . wise men who took to the road.

-- wise men who said, "We have seen his star in the east and we have come."

That's the second observation: it was where they had been that they saw this wonderful thing. I am numbered among those who honestly believe that every single person is capable of responding to what God would offer him. It may be true that in certain places it's made easier for us to see, it may be true that in certain places it's made easier for us to hear. And maybe some of us need to surround ourselves with a particular kind of environment that's conducive to hearing angels sing. But nonetheless, I do believe that no matter where a person may be, that's the point at which they begin by which to respond to what God is always offering to us. You may decide that you happen to be at a point where you ought to get away from that, and move to some better vantage-point. But even that's the beginning! The wise men who took to the road began at the point where they happened to have been! They took their first step from where they were.

I have little patience with people who allow themselves to think--If only they were somewhere else! If only they were someone else, then all these wonderful things would happen to them. God has so made us that it's possible for us to respond to Him where we happen to be. There's always the point of the beginning. The wise men said, "We saw -- where we were." . . . and then they responded, at that particular point.

I have reason to think they did not delay....I have reason to think they did not de-

lay. The tragedy for any number of people is that when something wonderful happens to them, they do not at once respond. There's a certain something about responding when the first glow appears. We choose very carefully the material that appears on the front page of the bulletin that you'll get on Christmas Eve. And on my desk right now is a collection of those that we've used on previous years as we think in terms of something sharp to focus on this year, this Christmas of 1980. I remember those of other years:

-- "UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN"

-- "CHRISTMAS IS FOREVER"

-- "CHRISTMAS IS TODAY"

-- "CHRISTMAS IS NOW"

. . . a verse of Scripture that has always pricked my conscience: "Behold, now is the acceptable time . . . behold, now is the day of salvation."

-- "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him
while He is near . . . "

When the vision splendid appears -- act! -- and act now.

I sometimes take myself to task and think that I ought to be the kind of a preacher who never concludes a sermon without saying, "Is there anyone present now who has yet to make a firm commitment to Jesus Christ? -- and should the Holy Spirit be at work in your life right now, let's plan to talk about it ere another hour runs its course!"
" . . . We saw his star, and we have come . . . " Which is simply to imply: we acted, we did something upon it....and we have moved."

The next observation that comes quickly to mind is that while they continued on their journey, I have no reason to believe that the star was always as bright to them as it should have been. Now listen to me carefully: not that the star was not bright, but I think there must have been times and seasons when their faith began to wane, when they knew measures of discouragement and disappointment,--and when they discovered the price that had to be paid to persevere in their pursuit.

I don't mind telling you, I've had my moments when I have been troubled with my own spiritual growth and development. I used to covet for myself that happy measure of peace, the peace that the world could never take away. And I used to allow myself to think that it would always remain constant. But it doesn't. Human as we are, we have this ebb and flow, we have these times and seasons. And the flame will flicker, human as we are. And I think this must have been true for them on occasion as well. But there was always some measure of flame before them, and that's what we must always remember.

But I'm also inclined to think that as they traveled along that road that led toward Bethlehem, every now and then, I think, human as they were, they may have gotten off the track. There may have been a detour.

In the first parish that I was privileged to serve -- I remember her confession, a preacher's daughter who said, "It's wonderful to be back in the grace of the Good Lord! When I was in college, Pastor, I got off the track." It can happen to anyone -- there is always that possibility to stay on the detour too long, there is always the temptation to travel too far on the wrong road. But fortunately detours are temporary. There is always the happy prospect to get back on the right road, and I think that must have been their experience as well.

"We have seen his star in the east, and we have come . . . "

It was not a giant step. There are those who tell us it took years for them to make the journey, and when they arrived they were not the same people who started. A lot had happened to them. But all that happened to them happened in the light of what they were following, and they were kept to the road by the vision splendid. That motivated them. Which leads me to ask you this question now: As you travel through life, what is it that motivates you to continue? Is it always the happy prospect of what lies ahead? I subscribe to the notion that we go through life in passages. We have certain chapters in our lives in which we experience certain things. It may be a salutary thing to do that. The whole journey was not meant to be made with one giant step, but those chapters, and those passages must be seen as a part of the total, must be seen as what is yet to be ultimately written.

I don't mind telling you, I've gone through all kinds of temptations as I've reached my sixth decade, and the worst of all temptations is to look back and to think that the best has been. I have no right to continue as your Pastor if I allow myself to be imprisoned by the past and to lock myself into what has been. Happy indeed is that person who continually goes through life with the forward look, the best of life is yet to be -- the last for which the first was made! -- and from a purely Christian perspective. That's why God is always placing before us the happy prospect of Heaven, and Heaven belongs to those who have the forward look.

What motivates you in your journey through life -- the happy prospect that that good thing is yet to come? -- something far better than you have ever known before? But I would do you a disservice, my friend, if I did not spell out for you in bold letters that

at journey's end they found unmistakably, undeniably, the fact of God. The worst thing that can ever happen to a person, as I see it, is to go through life and never end up with that tremendous experience of the fact of God.

" . . . We have seen his star in the east and we have
come to worship him . . . "

....you know how it ends:

" . . and they came and found Mary and Joseph, and the
babe lying in the manger . . . "

...and then they adored Him.

This sermon being preached on the next-to-the-last Sunday in Advent is simply to remind you that wise men are remembered not because they began a journey, not because they saw a vision splendid - - - they are remembered because they stayed to the road. They were motivated by what had been revealed to them. God always makes Himself graciously known to us. And happy indeed are they who travel -- motivated by God. No person, properly speaking, goes through life self-propelled. The saints are always those who have been drawn by something over, above and beyond them. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

" . . . ABOUT THE WISE MEN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father, and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Father Walter Berghardt is a Jesuit priest who is much in demand for conducting retreats and delivering homilies on special occasions. He's written a book, "Tell It To The Next Generation," and in that book he observes how on one occasion he was wrestling with an Easter sermon. It all went well until it came time to polish the introduction. He was hoping perhaps to have a significant one-liner, an attention-grabber at the very beginning. The muse did not work. No such introduction was forth-coming.

So over at Woodstock, here in Maryland, when the Jesuits had their seminary there, or their center, he walked down the hall to his good friend John Courtney Murray, and he told him of his plight and enlisted his help, hoping perhaps that he might give him a one-liner or some attention-grabber statement. His colleague simply said to him, "Walter, why don't you just tell the people what it is that you are going to tell them?" - He never forgot the counsel.

As I stand at this sacred desk I'd like to tell you just what it is that I want to tell you this morning. I want to tell you again and again and again about the wise men, who saw the star and took to the road, and who persevered with patience until they arrived at journey's end. That's what I want to tell you about. But I'll go beyond John Courtney Murray one step farther and I'll tell you exactly why it is that I want to tell you these things. One ought not only to tell people what he is going to say, but on occasion it could be helpful if you could tell them why you see fit to say these things. Let me be as frank and as fair with you as I can.

From the vantage-point which God has given me, I'm fully aware that some of you have begun the journey in the direction toward God, and on occasion you have been prone to give up. I'm also aware of the fact that some of you, having begun the journey, have allowed yourself the luxury of a detour on which you have stayed too long. I am perfectly aware of the fact that some of you also, as you have endeavored to take the straight and narrow path, have discovered a very attractive road that leads in another direction, and for too long a period of time you've traveled on the wrong road. I know this.

God could not allow me to be the shepherd and bishop of your souls without being

sensitive as to where some of you happen to be, and also to realize and realize full well that every single one of you, I dare say, has had his moments when you have been nobly intentioned, and there has been no question in your mind whatsoever that you would constantly chart your course by God's leading. But you are human. And so am I. And who among us can honestly say that he has persevered with patience, without any doubting, without any detouring, in the course which God has set before him? Because you may happen to be in that situation as I have been, I make bold to talk to you again about the wise men -- who began their journey, who continued their journey, and who arrived. And that's precisely why they're remembered. And that's precisely why they command our attention and speak to our condition.

The words of the text:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.' . . . and when they came to the house they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshiped him. Then, offering their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh . . ."

Observation No. 1, please: They came to find God by a slow, deliberate search. Not everyone finds God through a slow, deliberate search.

They were disciplined -- one week after another, one month after another, one year that followed another year. That's how they came to find God, by persevering with patience, I dare say.

But not all people come to God in the same way. Interestingly enough, some people come to God quite quickly, suddenly, unexpectedly. Exhibit A, if you please: the dying thief on the cross. We're led to believe that he never gave much thought to God! Honestly, one can come to that conclusion -- when there, all of a sudden, with death only minutes away, he's confronted by Jesus Christ, and in a moment, if you please, he's given the assurance that God will always cradle him in His arms, to use a figure of speech. That's how he came to God -- suddenly, quickly, unexpectedly.

Or there could be people coming to God as did that man, the Arctic explorer, who in the barren wilderness received a vision of Jesus Christ in the snow in front of him -- as clear as day, unmistakably God, and then he was miraculously rescued, freed from his plight. He went back to his native town and gave 33 years of his life until he died, testifying to the goodness and glory and the grandeur of God. Not all people come to

God in the same way....

- some unexpectedly
- some quickly
- some suddenly
- some even miraculously....

The wise men constitute the patron saints of all those who come to God after a long search.

I was made appreciative of this when in my first parish that God gave me to serve a man came to me, considerably older than I at that time, and he said, "You'll have to be patient with me, Pastor, I don't have what you have. I'm searching -- I'm not sure that I'll ever find God, but I'm looking." There are people like that, who have never come to appreciate the peace of God that passeth all understanding. They are tortured by the fact that they wish they had what some of you have so easily. Not all people come to God in the same way. The wise men represent those who have to persevere with patience, continue the search.

But they also represent those to whom God has a concern. That's part of the glory of God who has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ -- He recognizes us as we are and where we happen to be, and He takes care of us.

Why are you here this morning? For the simple reason that you need constant nurturing, for the simple reason that you need to edify yourself again and again....for the simple reason that we need to inspire each other as we find ourselves within the shadow of the altar . . . for the simple reason that we need every now and then -- and don't get me wrong! -- to have someone say to us authoritatively: "Your sins are forgiven -- God loves you." We need to have that said again, and frequently so.

And that's the observation that I bring to you now when I remind you that ever so often as they traveled they must have said to themselves, "Remember how we began -- remember the promise that we made -- remember the commitment we made as we began this journey, and we're never going to give it up!" They would never have arrived if they had not reminded themselves that once they made the decision to begin.

God gives me the good fortune occasionally to conduct retreats for Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and my first inclination is always to share with them the Service of Ordination, where they have been ordained ten years, or fifteen years, or twenty years -- to have them go back and commit themselves anew to what they promised. You are making a mistake if you think that they simply drift automatically toward Bethlehem, for there is always before us this matter of choices. One ought not to say, "I do not

have a choice." This is what I wrote in a journal to myself, lest I forget and become victimized by circumstances. So I wrote to myself: " . . . and there is always the matter of choices. One ought not to say, I do not have a choice, as though fate itself is to be made responsible for the eventuality. The individual cannot escape the burden of responsibility. Even to accept the fact that he may not have a choice is the making of a decision!"

At any rate, with all the strength that I can command I would say to you early or late, one cannot escape the necessity of decision-making. No one ever has it all tied up, neatly and cleanly, for the rest of his life. Each day the decision has to be made anew, either to keep whatever has been agreed upon, or the manner in which you're going to alter it. A person really can't take his hand off the wheel of life. The course needs constantly to be maintained by willful and deliberate action.

This is why I am speaking to you now about the wise men. They are the epitome of this kind of thing, remembered not because they saw a sign, remembered not because they made the decision to follow . . . but remembered because having seen the sign and having decided to follow, they persevered with patience and did not allow themselves to become disobedient to the heavenly vision.

I am numbered among those who looks back to the days of his youth, impressionable as they were, when we memorized certain bits of poetry that inspired us and gave us noble thoughts. I'm numbered among those, -- please understand how I say it -- who at a certain period in my life had the noble dream. Of necessity I have to go back ever so often and allow the vision to be restored.

As precious as anything is the story of a man named Zacchaeus, and one of the first things that I wanted your Associate Pastor to see when together we went to the Holy Land was a sycamore tree in Jericho. He knows exactly why I wanted him to see it. Legend has it that every day at sun-down this old man came and stood underneath that tree. A stranger to those parts came, having been there a short while, became cognizant of this custom of this old man to come and simply to stand or sit within the shadow of the sycamore tree at sun-down. He said to him, "Old man, why do you do this? I see you doing this every day. Tell me, why do you do this?"

....The old man said, "My name is Zacchaeus -- it was within the branches of this tree that I first saw the face of Jesus Christ as He looked at me and claimed me as His own. I come back here to remind myself of what I saw . . . "

In all fairness I must also tell you that as they traveled they were not certain

where they were going to arrive, nor when. They only knew the direction that they were meant to take. And this is something that could speak to your need and my need as well. For some of us are always frustrating the grace of God. We want to know the precise time, we want to know the precise place - - we even want to dictate precisely the conditions that will prevail. And God never allows us that kind of luxury. He simply says, "This is the way - - follow!"

Thomas Merton, whose name rings a bell in the hearts of some of you, once wrote, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I'm going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following You, and Your will, does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You, and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may not know anything about it. Therefore, I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for You are with me, and You will never leave me to face the perils of life alone."

This, I dare say to you, are the lessons we learn from the men who stuck to the road - - "and never took their eye away from the sign that God gave them.

My friend, wherever you may be at your journey, ask God to give you the eyes by which to see the sign and the direction which you are meant to take. You can trust Him for everything He will be beyond that point . . .

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, give me a light that I may find my way."

....he said to me, "Go out and put your hand in the hand of God, and that will be better to you than a light and safer than a known path . . . "

(this sermon transcribed as recorded.)

"CHRISTMAS IS GOD'S WAY OF SAYING 'I LOVE YOU'"

QUIET our minds and hush our hearts,
O God, that it could happen again for
us, even as it happened for them, a
star could be seen and the song of
angels could be heard. Through Jesus
Christ Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

I am perfectly aware of the fact that as I stand at this sacred desk I am doing so for the 25th time that marks the night of the Holy Nativity. You'll permit me, then, to set aside the sermon that I had fully prepared for this evening, for I am constrained to speak to you from an overflowing cup.

As I look back across this quarter-of-a-century, one reflection after another comes quickly to mind. To begin with, we would never have met, had not you and I, the people and the Pastor of this parish, been on the road that leads to Bethlehem. You and I have shared a common journey -- let me say it again -- we would never have met had we not found ourselves on the same road, leading in the same direction, and happily having the same destination. And that's an exceedingly precious thing to be able to evaluate. We met on the road to Bethlehem.

Which simply means that at some point in time you and I had made up the mind to decide that that's the direction in which we ought to go. You may have made it earlier in your case than I did, maybe not. But at any rate, the impulse had come at some time that we should not stay where we had been but we ought to look in a certain direction.

The next observation that comes quickly to mind is this: that the impulse to take to that road was not of our own making. It was something that we shared in common that came to us from beyond us. The value that I place upon your friendship, I place because the stamp of God is upon the fabric of your soul. And perchance whatever regard you may have for me is that you might discern, no matter how dimly it may be, of a like stamp of God upon the fabric of my heart. For no one travels the road to Bethlehem unless he's been called to travel that road, unless someone beyond us has taken the initiative and made known to us that this is the path that we ought to take. The decision that we made to travel that road, we made in faith, not knowing exactly what it was that we might find, either in one another, or as we should be along the road, or what the ultimate destination would be. We have taken to the road in faith.

Now all of this is reminiscent of a text from Scripture. Even though I am speaking to you tonight from the overflowing cup, I am imbued by a particular passage in Scripture that I could not ignore. It's recorded in the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

" . . . And the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass which the Lord has made known to us . . . "

The text deserves to be read carefully and earnestly, and figuratively speaking, with a pencil in hand, that you might underline certain words:

" . . . And the shepherds said one to another, Let us go now even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us . . . "

"...the shepherds said one to another, let us go."

The journey to Bethlehem is not a solo journey. I am not so sure that any of us would ever want to take the road by himself. The shepherds who traveled to Bethlehem traveled in a company. I'm glad I found you. Quite frankly, I need what you bring into my life as I travel that road with you. Some of you have traveled it a bit farther than I -- some of you have encountered one thing after another that I have yet to encounter, and because this has been your experience, you provide me the necessary stimulation and challenge to keep to the road. I can catch it in the tone in your voice, I can catch it in the gleam in your eye. You who have traveled a bit farther, you who have seen a bit more than I, encourage me and stimulate me to stay to the road.

I have discovered a very interesting thing as we think in terms of the third St. Luke Pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We will be leaving before too long. What have I discovered? -- People who have been there before on the pilgrimage say to other people: "You ought to make the trip -- it is as a pilgrimage. The Holy Land is like no other place on the face of the earth. You just can't read about it, you just can't look at pictures -- you have to experience it!" And on the basis of their experience they encourage other people to think in terms of making such a pilgrimage. I say to you, all of life is like a pilgrimage, and all of life is like a Holy Land. And some of you who have traveled the road a bit farther than the rest of us tell us what you have seen and what it has meant to you, and very properly you say to us, "Only as you experience it will you know it."

No man travels the road to Bethlehem by himself. It's never intended to be a solo journey. We need the stimulation and the challenge that we bring to one another -- I need you on the road to Bethlehem to point out to me the thing that thrills your soul

and in like measure I find it thrilling mine when I discover what it's meant to you.

And from my vantage-point as your Pastor I should also tell you, you ought never to forget how much other people need you. I marvel as in a quarter of a century some of you have laid bare your souls to me, let it all hang out in front of me! -- when I've learned how you have been able to cope and handle certain situations. Wittingly or unwittingly, I find myself passing it on to other people when I tell them what your experience has been on the road to Bethlehem -- and you're still on the road! You haven't given up, you haven't said it's not worth it -- I pass that on to other people. See, then, how much we need each other!as we travel this common road together.

Let us also recognize as we travel this road together, not because of any real initiation on our part -- sure, there was a point in time when we decided to make the journey. But we have been making that journey as we respond to the drawing power which was initiated by God Himself. That text needs to be read carefully:

" . . and the shepherds said one to another, let us now go
unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass,
which the Lord hath made known to us . . . "

....we're on that road, you see, because like the magnet of God we're being drawn together, and in that direction. We did not initiate it. I am absolutely convinced that anything extraordinarily good that comes into our lives, comes to us from beyond ourselves. It comes to us by the magnificent generosity of God, who places us in a situation where He can always say, "Some good and precious thing is right out there beyond you -- come! -- take to the road that you might find it!"

When I discovered that the day was going to be the kind of day that it is, overcast and gloomy, I said to a member of our staff, "How great, then, the responsibility is that comes to us as staff members so that when the people come and find themselves within the walls of Saint Luke Church, they will be exposed to something brilliant and something vital and something lovely! They ought not to be disappointed." For shame upon myself, as though I would intimate to another staff member that we, the staff members, we human beings, generate and initiate the kind of thing that you now experience! We do not initiate it, we do not generate it. We are simply God's agents by which it is passed on to you. Whatever thing of vitality, whatever it is that's exceedingly precious that you might know in your heart-of-hearts tonight, God has taken that initiative, and you're simply responding to what God is always offering to us.

" . . . and the shepherds said one to another, Let us go now even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass which the Lord hath made known to us . . .
...that's our God for you! He's always up to something wonderful. He's always saying, "It's out there ahead of you! I planned it that way." There is such a thing as pre-

venient grace, which is simply to say that God's at work even before we reach the point toward which we're heading. He's always out there ahead of us. That's one reason why some of us aren't afraid to go to bed at night, for the simple truth remains that when morning comes, the hand of God will already have been at work, and in our behalf.

" . . . and the shepherds said one to another, Let us go . . . "

Did it ever occur to you -- and this too is part of my overflowing cup tonight -- how differently the story could have been written? Suppose the shepherds would have been such as some of us are . . .

-- "It's too good to be true! God wouldn't make Himself known to me -- I'm not worthy, I'm a sinner -- I'm not a king, I'm not a potentate, I'm not a prestigious person . . . "

...the shepherds were as humble as you could find them. Suppose they would have said to themselves, "It's absolutely too good to be true -- it's a figment of our imagination!"

...or suppose one shepherd would have said to another, "Well, you can't trust your emotions, you know. We have been emotionally aroused tonight by this thing, we have been excited by it -- one doesn't hear angels sing every time! It's pretty good. But let's cool it for a while. Why don't we make a compact among ourselves that a week from next Tuesday we'll decide whether there's anything valid to it at all, and then we'll act!"

God be praised! -- they acted on a noble impulse. Without any hesitation, without any reluctance, they said, "Let's go! Let's hit the road."

I am numbered among those who find themselves acting very frequently upon impulse. When I have the assurance that it's a noble impulse that prompts my action, I'm never afraid. And some of the finest things that have ever happened to me have happened when without any hesitation I've responded to a noble impulse -- and I've lived to rue the day when I've delayed certain actions.....

" . . . and the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which has come to pass which the Lord hath made known to us . . . "

God is always heading in our direction, and God is always wanting us to take action -- now. "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found -- call ye upon him while he is near . . . " is a great verse of Scripture. It used to trouble me. But I know now something of the frailty of human nature, and the tendency to delay and to put off. I've lived long enough to know as I've trafficked with some of you, that it's only

later on that you begin to realize what you've always had. And that's part of the tragedy of life for some people -- it's always been there. God's love is like a constant. His goodness is unfailing. Why is it that some people have to live so long to discover what they have always had? The shepherds, to their everlasting credit, recognized immediately what was being offered to them, they seized the moment, took advantage of it, and headed on the road at once.

I used to be the most impatient kid on my street, I think, particularly at Christmas-time....."When will it be Christmas? When will it be Christmas? I can hardly wait." Ask yourself that question now, will you, as I speak to you from a brimfull cup, a cup that's overflowing. Christmas is always something that's in the present tense. You make a mistake if you think of Christmas as something that happened a long time ago. Christmas is now, because Christmas is forever...and Christmas is whenever any person allows himself to have the love of God become real in his life. That's what Christmas is -- it was God's idea of trying to make love real, and personal. Let me say it to you again: Christmas was God's idea of making love real, and very, very personal.

Mark Connally died the other day, at 91 years of age. He's the one who gave us "Green Pastures" you know -- that interpretation from a Negro's point of view of heaven and earth, and how God looks down from heaven on earth and sees it troubled and sinful, and with a heart that bleeds for man, sa ys, "I've got to do something about it...and the Archangel says, "And Lord, what do you think you are going to do?" And the Lord says, "Well, I am going to go myself -- I'll go personally. I will visit them. I will show them my love." Christmas is God's idea -- something that happens personally, and in the present moment -- whenever you allow God in any present moment to be at work in your life as an instrument of love -- that's Christmas. It's not a date on a calendar.

Now let me tell you three stories to prove my point.

Story Number 1: Victor Hugo, you know, in one of his writings, tells about the Bishop, was it the Bishop of Paris? -- who answered the door in the Bishop's house and is greeted by police officers. And they have with them one of his servants. The servant has been charged with stealing the silver candlesticks that belong to the Bishop's house. They make the charge as they bring the servant. They want the Bishop, of course, to identify the silver candlesticks and to further accuse the servant. The Bishop in one great moment recognizes his precious opportunity to allow the love of God to be channeled through his soul, and says -- "Ah, yes, the candlesticks -- the

candlesticks -- he had them? . . . yes, the candlesticks. I gave them to him." The Bishop lied, honestly he did. But before you fault him for lying, recognize this fact: that in one sublime moment the Bishop seizes an opportunity to allow the love of God to be channeled through his life -- then and there, in that precise moment --

"Ah, yes, the candlesticks, I remember -- I gave them to him."
...the police turn, and as they are about to go out the door, the Bishop puts his arm around the shoulder of his servant and says, "and now you belong to God." How else would the servant have known? -- Christmas is God's way of coming and putting His arms around us -- sinful, wicked servants that we are -- and saying, "Now you belong to God."

Story Number 2: You won't like this story, and I'm not so sure that I have the heart to commend you to practice it. But the principle of the story you cannot ignore. A mother had three sons. She observed their opening the Christmas presents, and then when every present had been opened she said to each of her sons, "Which one do you like best, which present do you prize most?" And each youngster in turn told her how excited he was that he got this for Christmas, this one gift above all the other gifts and how thrilled he was that it was his. Each youngster spoke in the same manner and in the same mood. And then do you know what that mother did? Recognizing in that precise moment the opportunity for her to illustrate the real meaning of Christmas, that you can't keep Christmas to yourself, that it's God's love being meant to be shared....

...after each youngster had identified what he prized most, she said to them: "Now tomorrow, if not tonight, you take your gift and give it to somebody else."

God could have kept Jesus all to Himself in Heaven -- adored Him. God so loved the world, that he gave -- " Christmas is God's way of putting His arm around us and saying, "This is the very best that I have." Christmas is God's way of saying, "I cared enough to give the very best."

Story Number 3: Real Life...out of a Japanese prison camp. The Commandant calls the prisoners together, there's a shovel missing. "Let the person confess who stole that shovel! There's an awkward silence. Then one soldier stands forward, as though to admit to the crime. He's shot on the spot. The next day the missing shovel is discovered. When is it Christmas? -- when a soldier discovers the precise moment, it's absolutely possible for the love of God, in a unique way, to be channeled through his life in behalf of others.

When is it Christmas? When people discover that it's God's wonderful way of saying 'I love you.' This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(this sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE DIFFERENCE WHICH IS CHRISTMAS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Sunday by Sunday throughout the Advent season, those four weeks in anticipation of Christmas, we thought together about the road to Bethlehem. Now that Christmas has come and gone, we turn our backs upon Bethlehem. But how do we turn our backs upon Bethlehem? We ought never to have been the same people as we were before we took a journey. There are some of us who maintain that as we think in terms of any trip that we might undertake, we can never again be the same -- a change sets in, either because of what we experience as we head toward a particular place, or because of what we experience once we arrive. Let it be said repeatedly -- no person ever returns the same once the journey has been taken.

That's the thought that's uppermost in my mind as I stand at the sacred desk this morning on the Sunday after Christmas. And the text is from the second chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, it's the 12th verse:

" . . . and they returned to their own country a different way . . . "
They had made the trip. Now it was time to go back.

The reference, of course, is to the fact they were told of the perpetration for evil of the wicked King Herod, and to spare them what others might experience, they were to go back to their own country, but not by the same route they had taken. So they had the two-year sojourn in Egypt. The wise men also went back . . . a different way.

Do not think of it simply as a change in travel plans as such. For our purposes this morning, think of it as people who returned a different route, but they returned as different people. It needs to be said repeatedly -- no one ever goes on a journey and returns the same person. It's the inter-play, you see, of people we meet along the way. They have their effect upon us. You can't be in the company of certain people for a while without having something happen to you -- you can't experience certain things, once you arrive at your destination, and not be somewhat different than you had been before. Now the question needs to be asked: What now is the difference that sets in after a person has journeyed into "Christmas-land," if you please? As far as they were concerned, they were different because they had encountered God directly and personally.

For some people God is just an idea. For some people God is a force, or a factor -- the Great Cause -- they're willing to begin at that point. But they never get beyond that. God is never fully appreciated until He is recognized as a person, who comes to us personally. When they went to Bethlehem, they did not deal with an idea of God; they dealt with the fact of God. We have a term for it in theological circles -- we refer to it as the Incarnation . . . which is simply to suggest: "God-Come-To-Us-In-Human-Form."

Dare I advance in your presence now the notion that any idea, no matter how wonderful or sublime it may be, doesn't have much meaning for some of us until it can be personally applied....

- don't talk to me about love as an idea, unless I can be assured that somewhere in this world there are people who love me....
- don't talk to me about truth as an idea -- it really won't mean much to me until again and again and again I encounter people who are truthful....
- don't even talk to me about beauty or integrity as principles, unless I can encounter people who are beautiful, and people who are downright decent and honest

So having gone to Bethlehem, they encountered the fact of God personally -- God-Come-To-Them-In-Human-Form. That makes a difference.

The second thing I dare say to you is that when they went to Bethlehem they encountered God in an unexpected way. And that makes a difference. Most of us, when we think about God have our own pre-conceived notion and we pre-determine the way in which we think He ought to come and what He ought to do. They were in for the surprise of their life. In fact, I sometimes think of Christmas as being one surprise after another. The wise men were surprised when they got to Jerusalem and found out that He wasn't there. The wise men when they went to Bethlehem got a surprise when they found -- not a king, and not a throne, but an animal feeding trough, and a helpless infant cradled in the arms of a teenage mother.

-- Mary had the surprise of her life when of all the people on the face of the earth, it's as though the eternal, sublime finger was pointing at her, saying, "I need you -- you are the one!"

-- and Joseph -- the surprise that came to him -- the woman to whom he was betrothed should have been chosen by God! -- and he would be entering into that kind of an arrangement himself!

-- the inn-keeper -- surely came in for the surprise of his life --
to think that the wondrous event since the Creation took place in his
back yard!

Had you spoken to any of them, they would have told you that they expect God to act in history, they expect God to act in time, they expect God to do something here on this earth. But none of them, I dare say, expected God to act the way He did, and to do what He did. And you and I become different people when we are forced to admit that God doesn't always act the way we think He's going to act. God can surprise us. They returned different people because they were surprised by what they discovered as the act of God.

To say it again, and until you get tired of it -- they were surprised that He came in the form of a baby. But that's our God for you! And what does coming in the form of a baby represent? May I say it to you -- a baby has no past. An infant has only the future, and that's God's way of impressing upon us the fact that as far as He's concerned, we must always be the people of the forward look, thinking in terms of that which is yet to come. God is always planning for a tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow. For the future is always in His hands, and no matter how much we may despair of the past, God says, "Think in terms of tomorrow."

I prize, as you do, those personal notes that we get on some of our Christmas greetings. We got one from a former friend and neighbor -- scribbled in his own hand hurriedly -- "After the despair of the past few years, let's take hope as we think in terms of the future." . . . They returned to their own country different people, because God had turned them around and said, Now think in terms of what lies ahead. Whenever you cradle a babe in your arms, invariably you think in terms of what lies ahead.

They returned different people because they had also encountered the Baby -- a baby, helpless. What can a baby do for itself? I remember the stages through which our two boys went -- that particular time when they couldn't even turn themselves over without the gracious assist of a pair of hands. A child is helpless. That's God's way of saying to us, In this world we're meant to help, and to do something for someone. A change sets in a person's life -- he can never again be the same once he makes that discovery, that as he journeys through life he's meant to be as a pair of hands to somebody else. God is always trying to get this idea to us, that we're meant to help the innocent, and the helpless, whatever their age or category may be. No man ever returns the same person once he's made that discovery.

(illustration from the 11:00 sermon.....)

(illustration from 11:00 sermon)

....When you discover that you're meant to help, and to be as a pair of hands for God.

Some of us have never again been the same as we journey through life since a baby came into our lives. It adds an entirely different dimension.

Bret Harte in one of his stories tells about a mining camp. For some reason there was only one woman among all the men, and when she died she left a baby behind her. Bret Harte in his book tells about the difference that set in, once those rough and rugged miners now discovered the responsibility of caring for a baby. The whole place took on an entirely different atmosphere -- became a bit more clean. They even became more generous and caring in their relationship with each other. It was also observed that whenever they came near the cabin, the filth that came from their lips -- no obscene language around that baby!

...They who returned from Bethlehem saw in every child, I would like to think, an opportunity to help.....

And as they journeyed they reflected upon the fact, whether they were aboe to say it in words or not, that they had encountered God Himself. And that makes all the difference in the world.

After preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ for four decades I still have my moments when I ask myself, what have I been up to these forty years? What has been my justification to go to a sacred desk Sunday after Sunday? And I allow myself a measure of comfort, honestly I do, when I permit myself to believe that what I have been trying to introduce is the God-factor in people's lives -- to introduce and re-introduce the precious truth of God and the fact that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. I am willing to suggest that no one ever really lives until he's made his acquaintance with the fact of God. I honestly believe that every single one of us is less than he ought to be unless in our journey through life we have become personally acquainted with Jesus Christ. And once that happens, a person can never again be the same -- because Jesus Christ does make a difference -- makes all the difference in the world.

Properly interpreted, it makes the difference between Heaven and Hell....

-- between damnation and salvation

-- between defeat and hope.....

They returned to their own country....a different way. Which is simply to mean: they were different.

How different are you this morning then you were December 24, if I may speak figuratively? Did it really make any difference? All these evidences that have come to us during this Christmas season -- people have a way of being a bit more gracious and a bit more generous at Christmas-time than at any other season of the year -- we've been exposed to that! We have encountered it! Almost every greeting that you open was a token of God saying, "Somebody loves you - - somebody believes in you." Every gift that you directed toward somebody else was another symbol that God is at work through you to assure you that person as they journey through life, that they are being cared for, that their presence is being noted, that they're being encouraged to keep to the road.

One has to add very quickly -- they returned differently because they were different - - something had happened to them....but they went back to their own country. For the moment, do you realize how difficult that may have been? For wise men to go back and say, when people would ask them: Where did you go and what did you see, you who went looking for a King? . . . and all they could say was they found a baby in animals' feeding-trough. Do you realize what it meant eventually for Mary and Joseph to go back to Nazareth with a baby in their arms and to tell the fellow towns-people the circumstances that surrounded the birth of that baby? -- the ridicule to which they could have been subject? The hardest place in the world for some people is to go back home, where they are known, and then to tell about something wonderful that happened to them that other people won't quite be able to appreciate.

But the amazing thing about our encounter with God is that no person can keep God to himself and to himself alone. Whatever encounter you have with God is never meant to be your own private personal rendezvous, your own private personal possession. The people back home need it too. How else might they know, except they find it out from somebody who's been there?

" . . . and they returned to their own country . . . "

That's what they did - - and they were different. But I would like to think their hometown was a bit different, because now they had people who had been to Bethlehem.

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(This sermon transcribed as recorded)